

The Charlie Rose Show

April 13, 2010

Analysis of Obama`s Nuclear Security Summit

GUESTS: Sam Nunn, David Sanger, Joshua Cooper Ramo

CHARLIE ROSE: We begin tonight with the nuclear security summit that wrapped up in Washington earlier today. The gathering of 47 world leaders was the largest hosted by an American president since Franklin Roosevelt called a meeting that created the United Nations.

The summit is the largest and latest step in President Obama`s bold nuclear diplomacy. He has pledged to secure all loose nuclear materials during his first term in office. Addressing the plenary session this morning, the president spoke of the threat of nuclear terrorism.

CHARLIE ROSE: Joining me now is Joshua Cooper Ramo of Kissinger Associates. He`s a former journalist who has written this piece in "Time" magazine "The China Challenge, A New Way Forward," from Atlanta, former senator Sam Nunn. He is CEO of the Nuclear Threat Initiative.

And joining us shortly from Washington, David Sanger of "The New York Times" who`s been covering this summit all day. I`m pleased to have all of them on this broadcast. And of course I begin with Sam Nunn in Atlanta. Tell me what you think this summit has accomplished and what difference it makes.

SAM NUNN: Charlie, it makes a big difference in terms of getting the world focused, particularly the leadership, focused on what I believe is our most serious security threat, and that is the possibility of catastrophic nuclear terrorism.

For the last ten years I`ve been posing a couple questions. What is it we would wish we had done the day after a nuclear attack, question one. Question two, why aren`t we doing it now?

It`s very unusual for the world and also for the United States to take this kind of action before a catastrophe. We`re darn good at taking action after a catastrophe, but this time it`s a unique approach of trying to prevent a catastrophe, and I think it`s of enormous significance that so many leaders around the world are willing to join in that effort.

CHARLIE ROSE: Define as much as you know well where the threat is and how it could happen.

SAM NUNN: The threat is nuclear terrorism. We have terrorists who would like to have a nuclear weapon and, in my view, if they had one, they would use it. They can`t get a nuclear weapon without nuclear material, highly enriched uranium or plutonium. That nuclear material is available, weapon-usable type material in at least 40 countries around the globe.

In addition, the know-how to make a nuclear weapon, unlike 20, 30 years ago, that know-how is out there. That wouldn't be a piece of cake.

But the most important thing we can do and the easiest job, frankly, for the good guys in the world, is to secure the material where it is and then blend it down and then get rid of it. That's the easiest job for us. The hardest job for terrorists is to get that material. We've got to make it a lot harder.

After they get the material, if they do, god forbid, every step in the process of blowing up a city somewhere in the world would be easier for them and harder for us. So once the nuclear material is in their hands, we have a very serious and perhaps unstoppable kind of scenario.

So getting out in front, securing the material, getting cooperation around the world is enormously important.

I also believe, Charlie, that we are in a race between cooperation and catastrophe, and based on the events of this week I think cooperation is running a good bit faster.

CHARLIE ROSE: And Obama deserved enormous credit for this?

SAM NUNN: I think he deserves enormous credit, and I think his credibility on this issue by reason of the speech he made in the Czech Republic helped him tremendously in terms of getting the world to come to this kind of summit.

I think it would have been much more difficult had he not already exerted a great deal of leadership in this regard and had he not also made significant agreement with President Medvedev and had not both of them indicated that U.S. and Russia with 90 percent, 95 percent of the nuclear weapons in the world and a very large percentage of the nuclear materials, if these two countries had not been willing to lead, I think would have been a lot less people show up for this summit.

CHARLIE ROSE: And would it mean that China came?

SAM NUNN: I think it meant a lot. I think it meant a lot economically as well as on these particular issues, and I think it meant a lot in terms of the relationship. Very few global problems can be solved without U.S. and China cooperating, and I think this certainly the nuclear one is one, Iran, North Carolina, as well as securing nuclear material and preventing proliferation.

But also economic challenges, and they are very much on the minds of, I'm sure, both the Chinese and American leadership.

CHARLIE ROSE: Was there a debate in China among the highest level of the Chinese leadership as to whether they would come or not.

JOSHUA COOPER RAMO: Tremendous debate, tremendous debate. Even as recently as last week in Beijing you saw reports at the level of the politburo of criticism of President Hu for the decision to attend is summit after what the Chinese referred to as a period of "deliberate humiliation" by the United States.

So it's very important to understand that --

CHARLIE ROSE: "Deliberate humiliation" has to do with Taiwan and selling aircraft or the Dalai Lama, or something else?

JOSHUA COOPER RAMO: That's right. Well, it's those two things, but it's also a general sort of climate in the relationship where from the Chinese side the perception is that the habits of discourse by the United States is ordering the Chinese to do things -- cooperate on Iran, fix your currency, tolerate the decisions we're making in areas that you regard as core national interests.

And that really begins to grate. One of the best-selling books last year was "China Was Unhappy," and that's a book that speaks directly to --

CHARLIE ROSE: The title is "China is Unhappy."

JOSHUA COOPER RAMO: Yes.

CHARLIE ROSE: And it was unhappy about the relationship with the United States and how they thought the United States viewed them?

JOSHUA COOPER RAMO: That's right, a general sense in China at the moment really that the country is not being respected on the international stage. And that's something that kind of dominates the discourse there.

And it's mixed also with a profound sense of worry because they feel the United States is weak and possibly declining. And in their eyes that makes us unreliable as partners.

CHARLIE ROSE: Sam, you travel around the world. Tell me how you perceive where China's mindset is on questions like this, and then separately question of Iran.

SAM NUNN: Well, of course, I think Joshua is the expert in this area, but from my conversations with the Chinese -- and I was with Henry Kissinger there last year and George Schultz and Bill Perry where we talked about a broad array of issues -- I believe they would probably ask the United States the question -- "it's fine for you to take these tough, hard positions, but sometimes you don't consider what it would do to us."

Now, they don't say it that directly, but they have significant economic interests in getting oil from Iran.

Also on the subject of North Korea, both the Chinese government as well as the South Korean government, not identically positions, but pretty close, worry about what an economic squeeze would do in terms of an economic collapse by South Korea -- by North Korea, which would pour over into both China and South Korea.

So if we're going to deal with China on these issues, we have to first of all, I think, as Joshua implied, we've got to listen to China, we've got to listen to their concerns. And then we have to be willing to help think through those concerns from their perspective, looking at it from their perspective.

We may not end up agreeing with them. We may end up disagreeing, but we have to listen carefully to what they're saying if we want them on board. And they have to be on board if we're going to solve either Iran or North Korea without a terrible conflict.

JOSHUA COOPER RAMO: The fact is, we have a laundry list of these problems -- Iran, North Korea, currency. They're only going to escalate. And the Chinese are going to be doing more and more things that Americans start to perceive as a threat to American national interest.

I think there's a view, and it's a mistaken view, that you'll fix this problem by tactically addressing each one of these things. We just guarantee oil from Saudi Arabia to replace the oil from Iran, everything will be fine.

These aren't tactical problems. There's an underlying strategic disagreement between the United States and China about what our relationship should look like.

CHARLIE ROSE: Is it different than the relationship between the previous administration and China?

JOSHUA COOPER RAMO: I think what's happened is that the Chinese view of their role in the world has matured. And I think the financial crisis has left the Chinese aware of the fact that their interests are more vulnerable than they've ever been before, and that's led to a recalculation on their side.

But the idea that you can just fix each of these tactical problems without an overarching strategic concept is just flawed. It's tail-chasing, really.

CHARLIE ROSE: I want to come back to that. David Sanger has joined us. Welcome, David.

DAVID SANGER: Good to be back with you, Charlie.

CHARLIE ROSE: So tell me what you think was accomplished today. You were there on the ground covering this. Sam Nunn is with us in Atlanta, and Joshua Cooper Ramo is here with me at the table here in New York.

DAVID SANGER: Well, I'm sorry for being a little bit late, but as you can imagine, the security was a little tight around the summit area. I guess if you're talking about nuclear weapons, their interest in having a terror attack at the time is pretty limited.

The summit was notable, I think, for two things. The first is that the president did get a series of specific concessions from individual countries who agreed to be on a schedule to either send uranium back or send plutonium back to other countries or to eliminate it altogether.

And these were called "house warming gifts" by Gary Saymore, who is the president's WMD coordinator. I think that they had orchestrated these to try to use the moment of the summit to make sure that there were specific deliverables.

But I think the more interesting thing was that by setting up another one of these summits two years from now, President Obama has said that countries will be measured by how well they do on these work plans that they've laid out.

And that's what's been missing in the past. You know, the United Nations passed a resolution in 2004 that required countries to control their nuclear materials. Very few paid attention to it. And there have been a series of other conventions, agreements, and there's been very little follow-up.

SAM NUNN: I certainly agree with David's observation about specific accomplishments. Ukraine is a country that has had several bombs worth of nuclear material, highly enriched uranium, for quite a while.

As a matter of fact, we made a fictional movie called "Last Best Chance" and Ukraine and South Africa were the two countries where we set up a fictional type of terrorist seizing of nuclear materials. So Ukraine, South Africa, Belarus all have significant stockpiles of highly enriched uranium.

And the Ukrainian decision to get rid of that highly enriched uranium and to blend it down in cooperation with the U.S. and probably Russia is a big decision.

CHARLIE ROSE: With respect to Russia and the agreement that was signed in Prague, does that signal to you that there is real developing confidence between the United States and Russia?

SAM NUNN: Charlie, just the process of having arms control discussions is an important feature in U.S.-Russian relations because that's a place where U.S. top defense officials come together with Russians. We have a much better understanding, even if we don't reach an agreement. I think during the cold war it made a difference in terms of reducing somewhat the risk.

We will have a long way to go with Russia because we still have huge nuclear risk on both sides, but maybe the realization will begin to dawn on people and Russia and the

United States that we have more common risk than reasons for confrontation, and maybe we will begin to change our cold war posture commensurate with the tremendous change and the risk to both countries.

CHARLIE ROSE: Let me turn to Iran. So tell me what you think the Chinese attitude was at this conference, David, about sanctions against Iran.

DAVID SANGER: Well, when President Obama met with President Hu yesterday, it seems as if Iran took up most of their conference. The rest was spent on currency and so forth. And what was notable was that at the end of this the Chinese basically just agreed to come in and negotiate in New York on the wording of a sanctions resolution.

Now, the administration was trying to spin this as a great accomplishment because the Chinese weren't there two weeks ago. They didn't want to participate. What we have to remember is that there have been three previous United Nations sanctions resolution, and the Chinese negotiated in each one of those. And in every one when you go back and interview the negotiators, they'll tell you the same thing -- the Chinese use the process to both slow it down and water it down.

And so the sanctions that came out in the end were not sanctions that were sufficient to get the Iranians to suspend their enrich of uranium. And really that's the only measure here, Charlie, because that's the measure the U.N. itself laid out at the beginning of this process.

I thought it was interesting during the process today that President Obama did not seem to hold out much hope that the sanctions, even if he gets them, would bring about a relatively rapid change in Iran's attitude.

CHARLIE ROSE: But he believes in sanctions because he has no other place to go?

DAVID SANGER: Well, he believes in sanctions, I think, for two reasons. The first is that it would convey a sense of international unity if everybody signs on. Of course everybody signed on to the previous one.

The second is that they would create a legal basis for individual countries or the European Union to go beyond the sanctions and do their own kind of economic penalties. And I think that many of them want the cover of the U.N. sanctions resolution before they do that.

CHARLIE ROSE: Do the Chinese believe that Iran wants the capacity to make nuclear weapons?

JOSHUA COOPER RAMO: You know, I think if you talk -- the public position, of course, is no and that they're going to -- they'll give all of the arguments on peaceful use.

CHARLIE ROSE: And they always say, "Well, let's negotiate and find out."

JOSHUA COOPER RAMO: Right. I think privately there is an understanding that nuclear weapons as a deterrent force are, in fact, quite useful.

If you look at the Chinese nuclear doctrine, it in fact is guided by the principle that you don't need a lot of warheads. You just need a few warhead, a limited amount of warheads, the minimum necessary to secure a deterrent.

So they look at Iran, they understand the nation's desire for self-determination, and they appreciate the idea that in their mind it is possible to have a limited nuclear force which is not an offensive threat. Remember, China has a declared no first use policy.

And so from their perspective they don't see Iran in the same threatening light that the west does.

CHARLIE ROSE: They don't think they'd use them offensively if they had one.

JOSHUA COOPER RAMO: That's right, because, again, that's based on their own doctrine.

CHARLIE ROSE: What do think of the president? What's they are sense of this young president and the potential to develop a relationship?

JOSHUA COOPER RAMO: I think they're concerned. When you talk to Chinese who are worrying about these problems, they are still very desirous of having a positive relationship with the United States. But in their view, Obama came in the fall, they had this great strategic declaration which they believed in, and then they were confronted with these two issues, the Dalai Lama --

CHARLIE ROSE: Could the president have avoided those two issues? And would it have been wise to avoid those two issues in terms of the broad political landscape he lives?

JOSHUA COOPER RAMO: The domestic American political considerations were clear to everybody that those were things he had to do. The question was whether or not you could create a strategic framework in the way with where you had the Chinese bought in on enough other issues that those became rounding errors.

And they don't feel at the moment like they're respected and paid attention to, and that becomes an increasing problem as our interests start to diverge.

CHARLIE ROSE: So what should the president do to say to China in no uncertain terms so we can get you on board with respect to Iran, we respect you, we listen to you, we like you, we want to build a foundation to do a lot of other constructive things?

JOSHUA COOPER RAMO: Well, I think it's a combination of two things. One is actually it may seem counterintuitive, which is being a little bit even firmer in trying to demonstrate America's national interests on particular issues, because the Chinese look to

some degree at some of the policy decisions by the Obama administration as signs of weakness, as signs of being willing to concede too fast.

CHARLIE ROSE: Like?

JOSHUA COOPER RAMO: The climate of the negotiation matters a great deal.

Well, even issues like -- the classic example of this was the decision of how the currency process was handled, for instance. And so that's one issue. It just seems to repeat the same patterns over and over again to the Chinese, which makes them worried.

But the larger thing is trying to create a new framework that recognizes that it's not simply about constantly asking China to change, which is what our policy looks like today, but actually acknowledging that the world system needs to change, that there are huge problems that have emerged since the end of the cold were that our current system is incapable of handling, and that we need new ideas and want China as a partner in the developing of those new ideas, as opposed to what it feels like in Beijing today, which is the U.S. is developing these ideas unilaterally and then showing up in Beijing and asking the Chinese to comply.

CHARLIE ROSE: What do you think of that, Sam Nunn?

SAM NUNN: I agree with Joshua on point two. On point one I would have serious questions about whether the Chinese are reading that much into whether Obama has the nuances of what they would call firmness, particularly on the currency issue.

But on question two, point two by Joshua, I agree. I think we have to understand that China's a rising power and that not just China has to adjust, but also the world has to adjust.

And I think the United States and China together are the ones to begin to guide the world toward those adjustments so that the rising power does not threaten the existing world structure, particularly in the economic sense, but also in the security sense.

CHARLIE ROSE: Do you think this administration is threatened by a rising China?

SAM NUNN: Well, I think that's been the discussion for the last 20 years. And China has certainly -- their changing so rapidly and they have developed so quickly that it's very hard for the world to adjust that quickly.

But all the world institutions when you look at them sort of have to be reexamined, and I think the U.S.-China dialogue on that, certainly a lot of other countries have to be included, too, we won't have just the two of us, but that kind of dialogue has to begin.

And I agree with the point that we can't simply lecture to the Chinese. We have to also listen to them.

CHARLIE ROSE: David, what's going to happen at the NPT review?

DAVID SANGER: Charlie, can I just make a point on China first and then get to the NPT?

CHARLIE ROSE: Yes.

DAVID SANGER: I was struck during the first Chinese-U.S. dialogue last summer, the first big dialogue with the Obama administration. The Chinese arrived here in Washington, and the first thing they asked for was a detailed briefing about the health care proposals that were under way in Congress.

And everybody was a little bit shocked by this, and it became clear to them pretty soon that the Chinese didn't really care about the public option or anything else. They simply wanted to know how much they were going to be asked to pay for this. And they still want to know the answer to that question.

But I think that to the Chinese, they see the continuing bankrolling of American deficits as their great point of leverage, not that they would threaten to pull the money out, but rather that it gives them a way of saying quite subtly to President Obama, you not only have to deal with us as equals, you have to deal with us as your banker.

And I think that's the subtext of many of the discussions.

JOSHUA COOPER RAMO: David's point is exactly right, and it highlights something else that matters a lot, which is there is this internal dynamic inside China today which we don't pay a lot of attention to. But if you look at the tensions inside the political leadership, we're heading into a policy change in 2012, you have new leaders come in.

There's no incentive in that environment for being pro-U.S. at the moment. The atmosphere is very much a sense of China should be better respected by the United States. And so it's hard for Chinese leaders to look like they're bending over backwards to do favors for the U.S. in this environment.

CHARLIE ROSE: And how is the new generation of leaders -- how are the new generation of leaders different from Hu Jintao?

JOSHUA COOPER RAMO: Dramatically different. First of all, they're much more diverse. So the generation you're looking at that's running the country today, largely engineers, all shared a relatively limited sort of world experience because of the period in which they grew up.

The so-called fifth generation coming into power you'll see just from a personality perspective -- and you've met some of them -- express themselves very differently. Some of them walk into the rooms and they feel like western politicians.

And then you go the generation after that, the sixth generation, which are the guys in my cohort, the late 30s, early 40s, they have an even more dynamic set of personalities, and, by the way, even more, largely speaking, suspicion of the United States.

CHARLIE ROSE: Even more in generation six?

JOSHUA COOPER RAMO: Yes.

CHARLIE ROSE: This is the most important bilateral relationship in the world, isn't it, Sam?

SAM NUNN: I think it is, and I think that one of the things that we have to realize is that while we are urging China to change its currency policies, which I think is exactly the right course, we also have to adjust our own fiscal policies in a very big way.

I think the Chinese lost a lot of confidence in the United States as a model -- economic model for the world based on events of the last couple of years. And I think we have to get our own fiscal house in order.

I don't think the Chinese see us doing that. And I think the point about their concern on health care and probably a lot of the other entitlement programs are pretty legitimate concerns when you consider they are the banker.

But from my own point of view, we've got to while urging China to increase consumption over the long haul, not in the middle of a recession but over the long haul, we have to increase our savings and we have to basically greatly increase our efficiency in terms of productivity.

CHARLIE ROSE: I'm tomorrow interviewing the prime minister of Singapore. His father is famous, Lee Kwan Yu, who in a conversation here at this table said to me the thing that the world leaders worry more about America than anything else is their capacity to handle their debt issues. That is the one thing that worries leaders around the world more than anything else.

NPT, David, close -- tell me what we should anticipate.

DAVID SANGER: Well, to some degree, the summit that we've just seen completed was the easy work, because it's hard to argue against cleaning up loose nuclear material around the world.

The NPT opens up a whole different set of issues. You will see Iran participate in the NPT review, which starts next month in New York as a full member. That means that they'll have some veto rights.

You will see the western countries and the nuclear countries, the current nuclear weapons states, argue that the loopholes in the NPT need to be closed so that countries can't do

what North Korea did and just send in a letter and say "I'm pulling out of the treaty," or that countries could don't what Iran is doing now, which is basically stay within the treaty but pick and choose which parts of it they want to comply with and keep playing a shell game with inspectors.

So there's going to be much more of a sense of conflict. And I think there more than at the meeting you just saw completed, you're going to see a conflict between the existing nuclear weapons states and the larger powers and aspiring states, including some who don't have nuclear weapons right now but think they may want them one day, or at least would want the capacity to build up to the edge.

And that's the big challenge for President Obama, because he has not yet really defined the policy for what you do with a country that stays within the letter of the law, builds up the capacity to build a weapon, but doesn't quite go the last step.

CHARLIE ROSE: Thank you all.