

Vladimir Orlov



On January 19, 2021, Dr. Vladimir A. Orlov, Director of the PIR Center, gave an interview to Security Index journal.

SECURITY INDEX: In your recent op-ed column, co-authored with Sergey Semenov and published by *Kommersant Daily*, you stated that “Russia and the United States, as major nuclear-weapon states are doomed to resume their work on preserving and rebuilding the strategic stability architecture”. What about nuclear nonproliferation, including the NPT review cycle and the upcoming NPT Review Conference to be held – hopefully, without further delay - this August?

ORLOV: With all the increasing importance of the P5 dialogue and process, I believe that our two nations, Russia and the United States, still have special responsibility for the smooth running of the NPT review cycles and for a successful 2021 NPT review conference.

In 2015, it was because of the United States (as well as their allies UK and Canada) that the conference failed and the final document was not adopted. However, the problem was deeper than disagreements over the Middle East and over the zone free from nuclear and all other WMD in the Middle East. The problem was that the United States, between 2014 Prepcom and later on at the plenary of the 2015 RevCon in New York, had introduced issues that had nothing to do with the nuclear nonproliferation agenda and with the NPT per se. With that, they had indicated that they preferred the blame game. Well, Russia had to respond.

Blame game at the NPT review process is wasting of time. I suggest that both nations should re-establish the tradition of cooperative game, if you like, and put the blame game aside. Tradition of cooperative game between the two nuclear superpowers had been established, on our side, by Andrey Gromyko who had insisted that, despite of all contradictions we had – we always had! -with the United States, despite of all the heavy baggage of disagreements, despite of Vietnams or Afghanistans, nuclear weapons and prevention of their proliferation in the world is so vital for Soviet national security – as well as for global security – that this issue should be treated as a separate basket free from the strains which could affect other baskets. Americans normally accepted such separation.

Not that it was always easy, particularly during the darkest days of the Cold War. But, mostly, it worked. As a result, we now have a very short list of nations outside of the NPT and with nuclear weapons. With the bilateral blame game, believe me, such list could be much longer. And it would not have been good news for our own security, needless to say for the global security neither.

SI: What should Russia and the United States do together today, this year – 2021 - when nuclear nonproliferation, in general, and NPT review cycle, in particular, are concerned? Asking that, we have to take into account the change of the owner in the White House that will take place tomorrow.

ORLOV: The recipes are not brand new. We should take those ones from the past which did not contain poison and which produced fruit.

We should resume and re-build bilateral Russian-American holistic dialogue on the three pillars of the NPT, easy like that. *First of all*, we should restore our collaborative work on **preventing horizontal proliferation** in the world. In my view as a nongovernmental expert, it is in the interest of the Russian Federation to keep proliferation as the top-priority in the international security agenda.

I hope the same still applies to the United States although these days, sometimes, it is becoming too challenging or confusing to judge.

Secondly, both our nations should do together our own homework on the Article 6 on the NPT. We should continue our **work on further bilateral strategic arms control**, making it non-stop and irreversible. We should not find excuses not to do this homework, we should not blame TPNW as it is already *fait accompli*, it will enter into force in three days from now. Well, my personal attitude is that TPNW is not a very helpful treaty. Instead, more effort should have been invested into the implementation of the NPT by all state parties, both nuclear and non-nuclear. Having said that, I believe that while Russia and the United States feel free to criticize TPNW as much as they like (and there are so many reasons to criticize), they should not forget to do their homework on arms control and nuclear disarmament. Extending New START should be a signal to the NPT state parties that Russia and the United States are back to dialogue and are back to their homework, taking it seriously. They will no further entertain the whole NPT community with endless *rights of reply* destructing from real business.

Needless to say, that Russia already offered a helpful compromise and a lot of flexibility on such extension. Sergey Semenov and I discuss further potential and more ambitious, although still realistic, steps in our recent column in *Kommersant Daily* that you mentioned earlier, so I will not spend more time of the NPT disarmament pillar here – not because it is not important; quite the opposite, because of its huge importance we have addressed it separately.

Thirdly, **Russia and the United States should rebuild the spirit and the practical work on bilateral cooperation on peaceful uses of nuclear energy**. Legal framework for such cooperation has been built. We should also promote international cooperation in peaceful uses of nuclear energy, including our full support to the IAEA, but without politicizing work of the Agency, including the issue of safeguards. It would open a Pandora box.

SI: When you say “prevent further proliferation of nuclear weapons in the world” – what nations or regions do you have in mind specifically? Iran?

ORLOV: Iran should remain top priority. It is the highest potential threat proliferation-wise. And the biggest potential opportunity for both for Russia and the US, and for all the P5, in case diplomacy prevails over pressures and politics.

In 2013-2015, the United States wisely invested into what we now know as the JCPOA, or *Iran Deal*. Trump chose to withdraw. It was a huge mistake (although, paradoxically, it demonstrated how Trump was committed to his election campaign promises, a very unusual think in the US.) Biden should correct it. Unites States should come back. Biden states he wants to. Let us check the words with the facts. Soon we will see how much (or how little) Biden is faithful to his election campaign promises.

If, or when, the United States is fully back to the JCPOA (without trying to invent an *updated deal* which would be as huge mistake as Trump’s earlier withdrawal; I am afraid that some have not realized it, not only in the United States but also in Europe – in Germany, in particular) Russia should be supportive and should contribute to full, transparent, and sustainable implementation of the JCPOA by all parties, including Iran. Russia is well positioned to do so. Russia maintains its vibrant dialogue with all key stakeholders in the region and beyond, including Iran itself, as well as with our Israeli partners and with Saudi Arabia.

No one would like Iran to experiment with dangerous things. No one in Russia. We do not want Iran to play unsafe, but we cannot stop Iran from playing unsafe while Americans are out and while Americans do not deliver. All parties to the JCPOA should be equally responsible and reliable.

SI: What about DPRK?

ORLOV: It was a huge mistake by President Trump to try to deal with North Koreans bilaterally, although establishing personal relationship was not a bad thing, it was one of very few positive things when Trump’s nuclear nonproliferation policy was concerned. But it did not produce results. And it could not. The North Korea nuclear issue is part of the regional issue as much as it is dependent on security assurances by the United States to **DPRK**.

Let’s address the whole regional issue, holistically. I would make a risky forecast that solving the North Korean nuclear issue is doable! And it is doable in a relatively short period of time. Am I overoptimistic? When you deal with proliferation, you would be of a safer side when you are a pessimist. Big problems are resolved rarely. Instead, we go circles and circles... Long circles, like with the Middle east... However,

we had a few major breakthroughs in the past which provide me foundations for my cautious optimism vis-à-vis DPRK.

SI: Breakthroughs like South Africa renouncing and destroying its nuclear weapons arsenal?

ORLOV: Correct. And, more recently, like the JCPOA. We should be realistic. But we also should be ambitious and result-oriented, not process-oriented.

SI: You said that the whole region should be addressed, not only DPRK. What are you talking about?

ORLOV: We at PIR Center have just started a new project *Thinking of Unthinkable*. What states could potentially be added to the current *Nuclear Nine* with nuclear weapons in the near- to mid-term future? We already discussed Iran. This is the highest probability in case diplomacy fails. But there are at least two nations neighboring DPRK in East Asia who could be added to the top of this list, I guess. It is **South Korea**, and it is **Japan**.

SI: Who else should be in this "unthinkable" list?

ORLOV: Saudi Arabia. Turkey. Perhaps, Brazil, although in case of Brazil this is purely hypothetical, they do not have geopolitical reasons to look back to their nuclear-weapon program, to take it from their secret coffins. At least, not at the moment.

SI: And addressing potential proliferation threats coming from such "threshold" states – should it be on the Russia-American bilateral nonproliferation dialogue agenda?

ORLOV: Absolutely. We have history of such dialogue, including in the 1970s and 1980s. Not always it led to proliferation prevention. Pakistan was a mutual failure. But there were success stories. We should not ignore them. We should not ignore the fact that jointly Russia and the United States can do *a lot* to stop others from thinking of going nuclear. But for that, we need at least two things. We need to maintain a frank dialogue immune from stormy weather in our bilateral relations. And we need to lead by example.

By the way, when I provide you with the list of potential new states with nuclear weapons, I also look at the analysis of my American colleagues. Some of them worked with the Democratic administrations in the past. Perhaps, our analysis may not coincide. But our lists do coincide... almost.

SI: You refer to this "separate track" in Russian-American relations when nuclear issues are concerned, already for the second if not for the third time in this short interview. But is it feasible? The Biden administration will bring such issues as human rights, as Ukraine. Jacob Sullivan has already commented on Navalny's arrest at Sheremetyevo Airport... and this to be continued, if not intensified.

ORLOV: If it is intensified – which is not unlikely, I have to agree with you – a comprehensive bilateral nuclear dialogue, as I described it, would not be possible. Unilateral accusations are hardly a fertile ground for a serious dialogue on such sensitive and serious matters as nuclear weapons and global proliferation threats.

Risks that we will lose the momentum to come back to a productive bilateral nuclear dialogue are high.

However, there are quite a few people in the Biden administration who are knowledgeable about nuclear nonproliferation matters and who are highly professional – which is a huge difference with the departing administration. You mentioned Sullivan... He played an important, a positive role in shaping what we now know as the JCPOA. It is time for such people as Jacob Sullivan, Bonnie Jenkins, some others in the new administration to demonstrate whether they are still committed to multilateral diplomacy and to the cooperative game, not to blame game.

When I look at the options for Russian foreign policy, I always think of that very sensitive moment in 2014 - early 2015 (but particularly in 2014) when negotiations on Iran were going on... with the United States, UK, France, Germany at the table, among others... and Russia. And – in a parallel universe – the Americans, the Brits, the Germans – they all were introducing sanctions against Russia, because of Crimea. US war ships in the Black Sea... and so on... But was it a parallel universe, really? Or was it the same universe? Was it right, for Russia, to continue sitting at the same table with those who were introducing sanctions against her?

SI: Was it right?

ORLOV: It is a difficult question. I think it was. JCPOA was a good concept, which, when signed, turned into an important document. It is not Russia's fault that the Americans withdrew. It has been a lot of effort on the Russian side to contribute to JCPOA, and, later on, to keep it alive. One could even say: Russia did more than it should have done... But it has been in Russia's national interests, in my view.

The same applies to the destruction of chemical weapons in Syria.

SI: In the beginning, you stated that the role of the P5 will be “increasingly important”. Could you elaborate on that? Many observers of the P5 discussions believe that it is a highly boring process, and an inefficient mechanism – useless, at a minimum.

ORLOV: Boring, yes. Useless, no. This is the only forum when not only Russia and the United States, but also other three nuclear-weapon states (in the definition of the NPT) – UK, France, and China – can exchange views, compare notes and contribute to the NPT strengthening.

SI: What issues would you suggest to put on top of the P5 agenda in 2021-2022?

ORLOV: *First, CTBT.* What strategy should be implemented that CTBT enter into force in the foreseeable future? And that the moratorium on testing is respected by all states with nuclear weapons? With three states within the P5 who ratified CTBT, with two who have not done it yet, as well as with those three to four nations in mind who are outside the P5 but who have history of testing, - I would expect a dynamic discussion.

Please, do not forget that we have a vibrant discussion on CTBT domestically, here in Russia. Some reputable experts recently questioned the usefulness of CTBT for Russia's national interests, for Russia's military interests. Not the CTBT – but the fact that Russia is honestly in, complying to the Convention, while the United States forgot to ratify it. These experts indicate that Russia's patience cannot be endless. This is why I suggest that we need to discuss it at the P5 level: it would be useful to listen, say, to the French, who have also ratified, although, unlike Russia, after a series of tests, or to the Chinese...

Secondly, nuclear risk reduction. This is a major topic, and a relevant one.

Thirdly, contributing to creation of new zones free of nuclear weapons in accordance with Article 7 of the NPT. Instead of criticizing TPNW which would be wasting of time, I would suggest to concentrate on positive agenda, and, in my view, new NWFZs are exactly what we need as a healthy and practical response to the TPNW. Think of Central Asia NWFZ. It was a great achievement, a great step forward in a sensitive region. Now we applaud to it. But I remember that 25 years ago the idea had been met with a lot of skepticism, if not to say with resistance. This is a good example for new zones, for new drafts...

SI: Like what? Middle East?

ORLOV: Middle East. Sure. This is a debt – re-read the 1995 NPT Conference Middle East resolution. Progress here must be achieved. But it will be the longest in the making. Have no illusions.

There are other regions as well to which concept of NWFZs can be applied – not immediately, but gradually. Take Korean Peninsula. Extend it to the North East Asia.

And, probably, some areas in Europe. We are familiar about multiple attempts to launch a discussion on a NWFZ in Central and Eastern Europe or in the Balkans... They all were unsuccessful because the issues were so much politicized. Times have passed, new threats emerged, and old threats are still there. We, Europeans, need a safer Europe, with fewer nukes.

SI: What should be China's role in the P5? And should there be a separate P3, or N3 (Russia – United States – China)?

ORLOV: China has been playing a constructive role within the P5. I do not see reasons why it should be different in the future. This is the right format. P3, or N3, or whatever you call the triangular Russia – USA – China... this is an artificial structure, John Bolton's dream. I am not interested in John Bolton's dreams. I am interested in realities. Realities are and will be quite different.

Let us not demonize China. When I hear voices here in Moscow (not only in Washington) that China would double or even triple its nuclear arsenal... and it will be close to Russian borders... Yes they can. But should they? And why should they? In my opinion, China will most likely go a completely different path, without multiplying its nuclear arsenal. Let us address real threats, not someone else's nightmares... or miscalculations... or provocations. And let us not play into the hands of those who would love to see Russia and China split.

In my view, a potential for Russia-China strategic partnership is a great one. One should use it with care. But one should use it, not get scared of such a task and such a mission.

SI: So far, you have not mentioned UK. But it is the third depository state party to the NPT, together with Russia and United States. Does London bear the same special responsibility as Moscow and Washington?

ORLOV: P5 is a good platform for **UK** to contribute, for sure. But special responsibility? I doubt so. UK is not part of that equation any longer. However, when I think, potentially, of the first NWS member of the TPNW, it would be UK. I know, I know... TPNW supporters would love to hear this... and what? I think this is the front where they can achieve a lot: United Kingdom. They can even win there. Strategically, today this is the only state with nuclear weapons who does not need them, really. UK should follow South Africa example one day and disarm, eventually, remaining under the US umbrella.

But who really matters to the current nuclear equation, although not part of the P5 (and not party to the NPT), - it is **India**. How do you expect to address China's nuclear weapons and not address India? And vice versa. India is a great power. It is a responsible nation – and nation with nuclear weapons for almost half a century now – which should contribute to both nuclear arms control and nuclear risk reduction, and re-confirm its nuclear responsibilities.