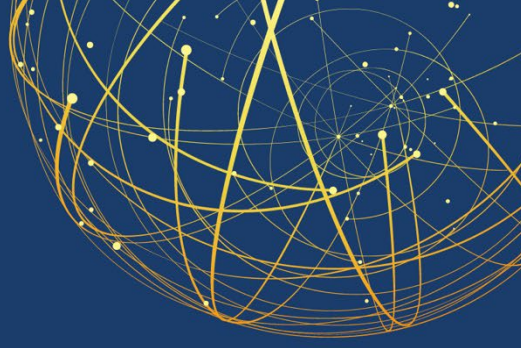

PART 1: A CONVERSATION WITH INTERNATIONAL ATOMIC ENERGY AGENCY DIRECTOR-GENERAL RAFAEL MARIANO GROSSI

Announcer 00:02

Please welcome International Atomic Energy Agency Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi and *The Economist* Editor-in-Chief Zanny Minton Beddoes.

Zanny Minton Beddoes 00:14

All right. Hi, everyone. Well, you need no introduction. You've just been introduced.

Rafael Mariano Grossi 00:21

Absolutely.

Zanny Minton Beddoes 00:21

Rafael Mariano Grossi. I'm sure you are all deeply familiar with what the International Atomic Energy Agency does, but I just wanted to remind you that it was set up in 1957 to promote the good atom and police the bad atom, right? Promote peaceful nuclear technology and police—prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

Rafael Mariano Grossi 00:47

Yeah.

Zanny Minton Beddoes 00:47

And that's where I'm going to start, obviously. And I'm going to start with Iran, which won't surprise anyone. So, preventing Iran from getting a nuclear weapon was one of the several plausible—or one of the several stated goals of this war. There were many others. Do you think two months and, what, six days in, that has been achieved?

Rafael Mariano Grossi 01:11

Well, yes and no. For that analysis, we have to start maybe in June last year. Because that time, the attacks were absolutely focused on the nuclear facilities, unlike this time, where you have had some impacts on the facilities, but it was not the main focus of the campaign. So last year, there were these attacks, in particular, on three places—Fordow, Isfahan, and Natanz—the core of the nuclear activities. Not the only ones, but the most important ones. And there was considerable damage there. Obliteration or not, I don't know, but there was a lot of damage. And so that, of course, rolled back the effort considerably. So, from that point on, what you have to consider is what remained: some infrastructure did, and importantly, more than 440 kilograms—in pounds, I don't know, 900 pounds?

Zanny Minton Beddoes 02:19

2.2.

Rafael Mariano Grossi 02:19

Yeah.

Zanny Minton Beddoes 02:19

Multiply by 2.2.

Rafael Mariano Grossi 02:19

Yeah. Well, exactly. Thank you. So, that amount, which is enough to produce a fair amount of warheads—which doesn't mean that they do have a nuclear weapon today, but having the material is very important, as you can imagine. So, I think that until you have dealt satisfactorily with this material, which is still where it was last year—it is in tunnels in one of these compounds in Isfahan, so it's there. President Trump has said under the rubble or the nuclear dust, whatever, but it is there, so it is still a considerable proliferation risk—this material which is there. So, it has to be checked. We used to inspect that—we used to seal that, and to weigh that, and to know where it was. Not anymore. We know, and the agreement, in general, is that it is still there, but it has to be dealt with. And then, you have to have some kind of understanding what is going to happen. What kind of activities is Iran going to pursue? How? Under what kind of control? And so on.

Zanny Minton Beddoes 03:48

And so you've been there.

Rafael Mariano Grossi 03:49

Yeah.

Zanny Minton Beddoes 03:49

You've been in these tunnels. Because I think we all talk about them—we all hear President Trump talk about nuclear dust. What's it actually like?

Rafael Mariano Grossi 03:58

Well, it's an underground facility. It's not a tunnel. It's more like a big infrastructure with labs, with things. More of—kind of a Bond movie.

Zanny Minton Beddoes 04:09

Like James Bond, I was thinking of that.

Rafael Mariano Grossi 04:10

Yeah. You go down it, it was a very sophisticated place where R&D—where fuel fabrication was taking place, with halls, with centrifuges, and cascades of centrifuges were installed and operating, and producing enriched uranium.

Zanny Minton Beddoes 04:33

So having been there, do you think it is possible to bomb or to use military action to obliterate that threat? Is that a plausible goal?

Rafael Mariano Grossi 04:43

Well, it would be very difficult. I think you can—as I said, as it happened last year—you can inflict a lot of damage, and this really happened. At the same time, to get to a point of certainty where you know that all of that is no longer there, it would be complicated. And at the same time, you cannot unlearn what you have learned. And fabricating centrifuges and this kind of thing is pretty complex—complicated, but it is not impossible to redo. So, this is why I have always said, and I repeat again—and I hope the current efforts are going to be successful in this regard—you need to have a diplomatic solution to this. You need to have some arrangement, some, "Okay, this is what we are going to do from now on."

Zanny Minton Beddoes 05:34

So, these—at the beginning of the ceasefire, when the agreement was struck in Islamabad and the two sides were there, we've had readouts suggesting that there was some talk about negotiation on the nuclear question and moratoriums on enrichment and so forth. When you see that, do you think that a) there is a chance of an agreement being reached, and b) if there is, it will be stronger or weaker than the JCPOA?

Rafael Mariano Grossi 06:07

A) Yes, there is a possibility of an agreement. And I think at the end of the day, what we can see is that both sides want to have some kind of an agreement because it is untenable. Comparing with the JCPOA, which was the old agreement that had been negotiated in 2015, and which President Trump set aside, etc., I don't think—because that agreement was predicated upon a much smaller, less ambitious Iranian nuclear program. It was dealing with an old type of centrifuge—certain amounts of uranium that they couldn't reach—certain facilities. The growth has been exponential ever since. So, in any case, you would have to be looking into a different object to be negotiated upon. Of course, you have to superimpose to that the fact that a good amount of that has been damaged. So, it's a pretty complex exercise.

Zanny Minton Beddoes 07:20

So, remind me how long it took? I think the JCPOA took a number of years to negotiate—

Rafael Mariano Grossi 07:26

To be negotiated, yes.

Zanny Minton Beddoes 07:27

So, I'm not sure the world economy can survive with the Strait of Hormuz being closed for a number of months—never mind a number of years. Does that mean that—because, as I understand it, the Iranians are now pushing an idea of let's work on opening up the strait and put the nuclear question for further negotiations, and the White House is not willing to do that.

Rafael Mariano Grossi 07:48

Yeah.

Zanny Minton Beddoes 07:48

Do you think they need to be separated, or can you actually agree a nuclear deal in a couple of weeks?

Rafael Mariano Grossi 07:53

That depends on the negotiators. And the thing here, as you rightly say, you have different things: You have the freedom of navigation, you have the missiles, you have the so-called proxies, etc. The nuclear thing, I would say, we have been able—and as you remember, we were negotiating in February until February 26, actually—and I was there with the foreign minister of Oman, who was trying to mediate in that effort. So, I think we are very clear on what needs to be negotiated. So, taking your reference of the time that it will be required, I don't think we would need a lot of time. We know exactly the places, we know exactly what we need to be looking at, and what needs to be done. It will depend on them. And, of course, we are supposed to be checking that that is complied with, of course.

Zanny Minton Beddoes 08:44

And so, you've met the senior Iranian officials. I'm sure you've met some who are no longer with us.

Rafael Mariano Gross 08:51

Yeah.

Zanny Minton Beddoes 08:51

They all consistently deny that they are trying to get a nuclear weapon. Do you believe them?

Rafael Mariano Grossi 08:58

Well, it doesn't matter if I believe or not. This needs to be verified. When it comes to nuclear activities, you can say whatever you want, but you need to be checked. You are accountable for what you have. When you have these technologies, these capabilities, you can say, “I don't do it.” It's not enough. So, you remember—trust but verify. So, I think that actually applies here.

Zanny Minton Beddoes 09:23

And can you imagine going back in the near future to inspect Iran?

Rafael Mariano Grossi 09:27

Well, we have returned partially. We have returned to those facilities that were not attacked, so the ones that are less sensitive, if you want. And everybody knows—and this is what we were discussing until the conversation was interrupted in February—everybody knows that for this to be a credible agreement and not the illusion of an agreement, that the IAEA or international inspectors must be there to check on all of this.

Zanny Minton Beddoes 09:59

So, I could talk about Iran forever, but I want to broaden to two other themes, and one is nuclear proliferation more broadly. Because there are a number of countries now—South Korea, Turkey,

Germany—that, in light of their concern about no longer being able to rely on the American nuclear umbrella, are at least discussing whether they might need nuclear capabilities themselves. Do you think that is a—are we heading to a world where more countries will have nuclear weapons?

Rafael Mariano Grossi 10:32

Well, I think the discussion is there, and that is concerning enough. I would say the fact that countries that until now were abstaining—were saying, "Okay, we are fine. There's a treaty, the Non-Proliferation Treaty. There's sort of a deal. I do not get nuclear weapons. I benefit from nuclear technology, but I abstain." And in some places, there are these discussions. I would say, in these things, one needs to imagine a little bit. Can we believe with the current tensions and fragmentation and polarization that you have, that a world with 20 nuclear weapons states would be a safer one than the one that we have? Personally, I don't think so.

Zanny Minton Beddoes 11:16

I suspect everybody here would agree, but is it an inevitable world that we are coming to?

Rafael Mariano Grossi 11:20

No, no, it's not inevitable. It's not inevitable because countries acquiring nuclear weapons—that would mean that there would be a reordering of their international positioning, for sure. For sure, they would be abandoning basic norms of international behavior—which, by the way, in a world where everything else seems to be under question, still the Russian Federation, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and the People's Republic of China—the five countries that legitimately have nuclear weapons within the regime—still sustain. They continue to believe that having this structure, imperfect as it may be, is better than free for all.

Zanny Minton Beddoes 12:12

They do, but they are no longer willing to exert or offer credible guarantees for others. That is why countries are prepared to do this, which brings me on to the last subject, which is that you are one of the candidates to be the UN's next secretary general.

Rafael Mariano Grossi 12:28

Indeed.

Zanny Minton Beddoes 12:29

There are three others. My first question is, why on Earth would you want the job?

Rafael Mariano Grossi 12:35

[Laughter] It's a good question. Well, I've seen in my work in Iran, also in Russia and Ukraine, where we have been working between the belligerents trying to avoid a nuclear accident at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, in Chernobyl, and in other places. Also, my work between China and Japan around Fukushima, that there is a space for multilateral, useful involvement. At this time where everything multilateral seems to be under question, if not seen with cynicism or irony, I believe that there is this space. I have seen it, and this is what inspired me to do this. I don't think it's good to have the UN in the place where it is—where it is basically absent from the resolution of any—take any international conflict that you may be thinking about. Of course, Gaza and the Middle East, and of course Russia, Ukraine, and of course South Sudan, although there is some presence there. Azerbaijan, Armenia, Cambodia, Thailand. And all of those that have these hotspots that you have all over. If there is one common denominator, it's that the UN is not there. And of course, to have lasting peace, you need some structure. It needn't be so. It needn't be so that the UN is so far from where it should be 80 years after. We should remember at times like this that 80 years ago, after a cataclysmic situation, we decided that we had better try to put some frame into international conflict.

Zanny Minton Beddoes 14:29

True, but you described all of the hotspots where the UN is entirely absent. Isn't that a function of the Security Council and the inability of the Security Council? Until you stop having vetoes of certain players, until they decide they want the UN to be central, it can't be central.

Rafael Mariano Grossi 14:50

Yeah.

Zanny Minton Beddoes 14:51

Does that mean—let's say you make it and become secretary general—you're going to have to kind of change geopolitics to allow this to become effective?

Rafael Mariano Grossi 15:00

Not necessarily, and this is why you have a secretary general. To put an example, because talk in the air is easy—when I went with my teams to Zaporizhzhia, I spoke with Zelenskyy, I spoke with Putin. People were saying, “No, you shouldn't talk to Putin.” I'm talking about Putin in 2022, not now. And it was possible to find some space. Of course, had I gone and asked the Board of Governors of the IAEA, I would still be waiting for an answer. So, there is this division of labor, this dynamic where—whereas not at all guaranteed—there is a space where you can exercise a noble trade, which is called diplomacy, and I don't see much of that.

Zanny Minton Beddoes 15:46

So, there is a criticism of the UN, which you hear a lot from this administration and this country—but not only—that it is bloated, it is ineffective, it is bureaucratic. It needs to be—Ambassador Waltz gave me, when I saw him in Munich, one of his caps that says, “Make the UN great again.” Let's stick with the spirit of it. I mean, how accurate is that? Does it need radical reform? If you came in, would you be cleaning house? How big is the challenge?

Rafael Mariano Grossi 16:20

I think what the United States has been saying is quite harsh, and I don't see many disagreeing with that, ironically. Well, of course, that is diagnosis. About the therapy, there could be differences, but I think it's clear, and we shouldn't be afraid to say that the UN must change. And I think when you have five, six, or seven organizations talking about climate, for example, it is obvious that there will be territoriality, that there will be duplication, and so on. So, I think there has to be an honest look at the institution—where it is, and where it could be. Because if you look at the basic pillars of the place where it was created, you have the peace and security, you have the development pillar, you have the human rights. Well, you see in peace and security—it's absent. In development, I don't think it tilts the needle too much. In human rights, I don't know how much. So, I think some of that is warranted. At the same time—and this is also interesting—no one says—even President Trump—no one says the UN should disappear, the UN shouldn't be there. So, there is this idea, and it's good that they have this idea of making the UN great again, isn't it? So, then we have to define—because there are others around the table, of course, who may have their own ideas of the greatness of the institution. But the thing is to have a secretary general that has boots on the ground, that goes, engages, talks.

Zanny Minton Beddoes 17:57

And how big are the stakes? If this turnaround doesn't happen, is it curtains for the UN? Is it just going to fade into irrelevance?

Rafael Mariano Grossi 18:10

Yes, that analogy. Because it wouldn't disappear from one day to the next, but it will continue drifting to irrelevance, which I don't think anybody wants to see. It will be defunded. It will be all the things that we are seeing. And we see that in many parts of the world—take the humanitarian effort and things like this—where it is extremely important, also in peace and security, in development. There are things that can really be done where we still need a global—it is the only global platform we have. You can have the BRICS, you can have the Shanghai blah, blah. You can have the G7, you can have the G20, but one—a tent where everybody is inside—it's still this one.

Zanny Minton Beddoes 18:53

So, in one minute, which we have left, let's assume you're successful and you're the next secretary general. What are you going to do in your first 100 days?

Rafael Mariano Grossi 19:02

In my first 100 days, the important thing there is to have a clear idea of where the big nations want to take this institution. And not only the P5, because there are others, very important nations that are not there, which are absent, which are absolutely relevant and decisive. And what you would see me do is talk to these people and see what is it that we can do so the institution helps us all.

Zanny Minton Beddoes 19:34

All right. Rafael Mariano Grossi, thank you very much indeed.

Rafael Mariano Grossi 19:37

Thank you very much. Thank you.

Zanny Minton Beddoes 19:38

Thank you.

Rafael Mariano Grossi 19:40

Thank you. That was a pleasure.

Announcer 19:41

We hope you enjoyed the discussion. The next panel will begin shortly.

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