

Leading the Global Think Tank: an interview with Jessica Mathews
By Xiangyu Ma

Retirement is tough to adjust to, even for the well-prepared. After eighteen years at helm of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Jessica Mathews stepped down early in 2015, retreating to the role of distinguished fellow of the think tank, one of the world's foremost thought centers for foreign policy. During her time as President, Mathews led the Carnegie Endowment's transformation into a global think tank with presence in Moscow, Beijing, Brussels, Beirut, and soon, Delhi. Succession had been meticulously planned, but when the moment came Mathews still found herself taken by surprise. "It's weird. I spent two years recruiting my successor [William Burns] and working really hard to get him. I was mentally prepared to step down. Yet when it happened, one day I was President and the next day an iron curtain had fallen. We were interviewing for a very senior new hire, for example. We were half-way through and all of sudden I knew nothing about what was happening. It turned out to be harder than I thought. I guess you don't put down eighteen years of commitment easily."

Mathews visited Claremont McKenna College on April 9th to deliver the inaugural Arthur Adams Family Distinguished Lecture on Global Affairs. The Arthur R. Adams fellows caught up with Mathews before her talk – "Can the U.S. Lead?" -- to chat about her leadership of the Carnegie Endowment, learn about the difficulties of running a global think tank, and her thoughts on the Iran nuclear deal.

> What was your greatest accomplishment as President of the Carnegie Endowment?

It was the idea of creating a global think tank, and building on the success we had in Moscow, to create centers along the same model in Beijing, in Beirut, in Brussels, in New Delhi. I've made seven trips to India in the last three years.

We were perhaps expecting to be unwelcome from Indian civil society but we didn't find that at all. What we found was real welcome, and a sense that we could raise the bar. That if we could raise the money it would help others to raise money as well. We were really surprised. Already we've developed some real relationships and we've not even opened yet.

> What is the process of global expansion like?

Moscow was started in the early 1990s. That was a weird time, because it was right after the fall of the Soviet Union, and all the funding for the Soviet institutes had disappeared. There were all these highly trained people with no income, so we were able to hire fabulous staff, and most of them are still with us. We've done some cleaning out this year because we feel we needed some turnover and freshening. Moscow's always been like this. Some periods we think, "This is the end," but in other periods we're extremely influential.

China has been difficult. There are no NGO laws, so you can't be independent. You have to have a sponsor institution, and for most of them, their interest is that you do as little as possible so they have as few problems as possible, but you want to do as much as possible, so it's very hard to find a match. We finally put ourselves at Tsinghua which has turned out

wonderfully. But, the last year in China has been a period of political contraction in what people can say and do. Visas, speakers, and approvals for events are more difficult..

Brussels has been easy. Tons of talent. The only problem is that it costs so much because of high taxes and benefits. You agree on a 12 month salary but it costs you 14 months.

Beirut. The day we were supposed to open, the very day, was the beginning of the war in 2006. We had to pull back the press release. Three months later we went ahead. The government was very welcoming. And people want to live in Beirut, even with all the danger, because it's such a wonderful city. They really wanted us to come, because the Gulf States had taken over their status as the financial center of the region, and they wanted to rebrand themselves as the intellectual center. They still are very welcoming.

> Could you give us an idea of the constraints you faced in China?

First of all, long complicated negotiations with potential partners. China's the one place where our director is not local. As entrepreneurial as the Chinese are in business, they are not entrepreneurial in the non-profit arena. In fact when you say "non-profit" to the Chinese, you can almost see them thinking, "What is the hidden agenda? Why would you want to be non-profit?" They're not very good at it as a result. So Carnegie's director there is an American, and he has done a brilliant job. It's kind of like feeling with your fingertips, what's allowed and what isn't, how it works with Tsinghua, how to build a relationship in the university where they really value our presence, how to stay within the bounds of what is comfortable for them and still make a useful difference. We can be successful there, it just takes a very extraordinary leader and you have to go very slowly, you can't push it. One thing we do everywhere is that we assume, in Moscow and Beijing, that everything we write is read, every phone call is listened to. We're completely transparent. We don't use any encrypted email. Sometimes it's a problem. Our management team meets weekly by videoconference, and the heads of the centers participate. So sometimes that means there are things we'd like to talk about but can't. We've gone through some tough moments in Moscow over the years but in the end nothing bad has happened.

> Could you share with us some of those moments in Moscow?

Early on somebody published an article saying we were a CIA operation, and this was just a couple of years after we started there when we didn't have much of a track record. There was another period when Russia was about to pass a law that would have shut down all foreign NGOs. We helped organize – at that time there were a lot of American NGOs there, before the big economic crash when virtually all of them left – an effort involving many NGOs where we went to see the State Department, and eventually Bush called Putin and asked him to reconsider. Eventually the bill was not passed.

There was a time when the government sent a team of tax auditors to look at our records and they could find nothing wrong. But someone was determined to find something, so after weeks and weeks they fined us \$78 because on our tenth anniversary someone had printed some pencils that said "Carnegie Moscow, 10 years," and they said that this was a form of advertisement and we hadn't paid the VAT on advertisements.. This was just before elections

when things are particularly tense. Russia has been through a lot of upheaval over the years we've been there. The Carnegie Moscow Center has established a reputation for excellent, nonpolitical work and become a brand name there.

> What are your thoughts on the Iran nuclear deal?

The most important thing is to look at the alternatives we have. There are only three. One of them is to reject the deal, impose more sanctions and then see if we can get a better deal.. We know what this leads to because we've been doing this for 10 years. We know that Iran responds to more sanctions by installing more centrifuges.. The thing with sanctions is that they raise the price of doing something the world frowns on, but if the country chooses to pay the price, sanctions can't stop them. You look at Cuba or Russia, anyone who's been heavily sanctioned.

Option two is a military attack. That buys you a delay of three, four years at the most and four years later you'll have to re-bomb. It means no inspectors on the ground so that when they rebuild you're blind. It means everything they're rebuilding will be underground where it is protected from most bombing. And it means that the entire Iranian population will be absolutely committed to the need for a nuclear deterrent. It would radicalize their politics, prolong clerical rule. It's a truly awful option.

And the third option is a negotiated deal. This is just miles better if you can get a good deal. If you compare where we are now to the total enmity and mistrust of two years ago it's quite amazing. You've got China and Russia and the West signed on to this, and provisional approval from basically everybody. The bad news is that there are at least two major sets of issues where they didn't reach agreement by the deadline at the end of March. The work of the next three months won't just be filling in the technical details and drafting the language, but actually reaching agreement on these two. One is the inspections regime and the other is the timing of the lifting of sanctions. This is potentially a huge success, which might be why the Republicans seem dead set on killing it. It would be a big legacy for President Obama. It would be the first big national security issue we've dealt with using diplomacy rather than military action in a long, long time. It has an importance quite apart from Iran and the region. A lot of the criticism assume that the Iranians are determined to get nuclear weapons. We just don't know that. The CIA concluded in 2007 that they stopped their weapons development in 2003. They may have done so for a number of reasons. First they saw that the covert operations are harder to hide than they had thought. Another possibility is that they've been surprised by how uniform and high the international pressure has been. A third reason may be that they recognize that if they have a nuclear capability with a handful of bombs, what it ends up doing is that it provokes Saudi Arabia to follow them. Then the nucs wouldn't be an asset but a huge liability because nuclear weapons are the great equalizer. My sense is that they've been slow walking this for a long time. They want to be a threshold nuclear power in the way Japan is. That way they feel more prepared for Armageddon but they don't cross this red line that could potentially cost them a huge amount.

The nuclear deal is potentially historic, but there's a long way to go and it may blow up. The catastrophe would be if Congress chooses to reject the deal before it's finished, or to weaken the negotiators' hand by making it look to the Iranians that we would not live up to the commitments to lift sanctions, or if it were to reject the deal after it's finished on ideological

rather than substantive grounds. The cost to us, as a nation that can't speak with a single voice, that reverses itself midstream, that turns away from a negotiated settlement, would be enormous.