The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
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AFSA Dissent Series

SAMUEL KOTIS

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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is May 2, 2024. This is our recording with Samuel Kotis for the special project ADST is running on AFSA constructive dissent winners. Sam, where were you born and raised?

KOTIS: Hi, Mark. I was born in New York City. But when I was a little kid, in kindergarten, my family moved to a small town on Cape Cod in Massachusetts. I grew up in this town where I am right now, actually, in the house where I grew up in Wellfleet, Massachusetts.

Q: Lovely. So you did all of your primary and high school education there?

KOTIS: Yeah, except for three years when my family was in the Boston area. But from kindergarten through graduation, I was here. I graduated from the local high school, which is Nauset Regional High School.

Q: During that time, were you beginning to form an idea of going into international service? College education, and so on?

KOTIS: Yeah, I was always interested in traveling. In our high school, we had something called the Odyssey Club where every spring break a group of kids would go somewhere internationally. So I was interested in that. My parents had both traveled a lot back in the 40s and 50s, when they were younger adults, before I came along. So I had heard a lot of stories about the world. I was interested in doing something international. At that point I didn't really know what, to be honest.

Q: In college, did you begin to hone that interest with foreign languages or travel abroad, so on?

KOTIS: Yeah, so for undergraduate I went to the University of Chicago, and I was a Political Science major. But at the time, during the Cold War, I was interested in Soviet studies. I studied Russian. Actually, after I graduated, this was the summer of 1985, I went on an unusual camping and driving trip through the Soviet Union which, at the time, was a few months after Gorbachev had come to power. So it was an interesting period to see things beginning to change a little bit there. But it was still quite early. So yeah, I was interested in that. Before I went to grad school, I worked for a few years in Washington at the Commerce Department, I worked for my congressman, my local congressman. I wasn't exactly sure what I wanted to do. I wanted to do something international. After a couple of years of work, I went to grad school at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs, and I was focused on the East European geographic area. While I was at grad school, I took the Foreign Service exam. Much to my surprise, I passed it. I didn't think I did so well, but anyway, I passed it. Soon after graduating from Columbia, I was invited into a Foreign Service class. So that was kind of my trajectory.

Q: Okay, what year did you enter the Foreign Service?

KOTIS: I entered in '91 and then went overseas for the first time in '92.

Q: Okay. At that time you entered as a political officer, or were they waiting to see how your career developed? And then you would determine your specialty?

KOTIS: I was part of that cohort that came in unconed. I don't think that's happening anymore. I don't think it was a particularly successful experiment. I came in unconed and I did my first tour as a consular officer in Jakarta and second tour as an Economic Officer in Singapore. And it was during the second tour that I then got coned actually as an Economic Officer, which was not my first choice. Do you want me to tell you a few assignments, is that helpful?

Q: Sure, in that way people reading this will have a notion of your background.

KOTIS: After my two tours as a junior officer in Jakarta and Singapore, which I guess is not even a term of art anymore, I took an assignment in the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) as a Refugee Assistance Officer dealing with the Middle East, primarily Palestinian and Iraqi refugees. As a result of that posting, I was able to get a follow-on assignment via Arabic language training to Amman, Jordan, as a political officer. I did political work in Amman for three years. Then, during that time I was able to re-cone as a political officer, which was really my first choice. No sooner had I done that, then I started on a series of assignments that were focused on environment, science and technology. First, I was at the U.S. Mission to the UN in New York for three years

covering climate change and other EST issues. Then, I was a regional EST hub officer in Budapest where I covered Eastern and Central Europe, the Balkans and as far east as the Caucuses. During my posting to Budapest, I volunteered to serve in Iraq and spent a year (2008-2009) as a Political Officer in the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad. After that, I went to London for another 3-year EST assignment. Then from there, I went on to New Delhi, where I was the number two in a combined Economic and Environment, Science Technology Office, and I was the deputy in charge of the EST part. That's how I got to be in New Delhi doing environmental work, which I then eventually did the dissent on.

Q: Now, as you are moving up in the Foreign Service, and you're getting experience and all of these different posts, did you begin to acquire knowledge or skills that would help you as an Environment Science Technology Health Officer?

KOTIS: Yeah, I mean, it was one of those things, I think, like a lot of things in the Foreign Service, as with each assignment, you pick up a body of knowledge that you didn't have before. But I became pretty conversant, and I think, well thought of in the Bureau of Oceans, Environment and Science (OES) and other U.S. government agencies that dealt with these issues. I was able to then continue to get EST jobs, which, as a political officer, wasn't particularly helpful with regard to promotions. But in the end, I enjoyed the work. We were also as a family looking for places that we thought would be interesting to go to.

Q: The other question about preparation is, during this time or in the Foreign Service, until you got to New Delhi, did you have any experience with dissent? Did you discuss it with other people? Were you supportive of a different dissent? In that sense, what was your background?

KOTIS: I would say nothing specific like that. I grew up in a home where there was a lot of argumentation and challenging of each other's ideas. To question something was the natural course of events. I think I always had that as kind of my general outlook on life. Over time, as I think anybody might, you have moments in your career where you disagree with whatever the policy is, whether it's something very fundamental or something very specific, but I mean, the reality of the State Department is that it's a hierarchical organization. Pretty much most times you say, "Okay, fine, this is what I signed up for," and I'll do the best that I can to implement a policy, the best that it can be done, and also flag for those who are the ultimate decision makers, if there's unintended consequences to some of the policies that they are asking you to carry out. I don't remember meeting anybody that was like a model on dissent in the Foreign Service, or even frankly, beforehand, but it was just a general sense of how I approached the world, I would say.

Q: Sure. One last background question. Among all of the environmental and so on issues that you followed, was air pollution or any sort of health related issues to particulates and so on, did that become a specialization for you? Or was your arrival in New Delhi where you describe the terrible smog. Was that the first time you were dealing with air pollution?

KOTIS: I mean, it was the first time where it was that acute. Right before the New Delhi assignment, I was in London and I was also doing ESTH work. Even though the levels of pollution in London are much less than in South Asia, it was an issue that the British government was considering. They were looking at Ultra Low Emission Zones in London. I was becoming aware of it although it wasn't a main focus in those days. Climate change policy was one of the central pillars of what EST officers were focused on, especially in large countries and countries that the U.S. felt was important to engage on for those issues.

Q: Yeah. Okay. Now, when you arrive in New Delhi, in terms of your work requirements, and so on, what place did air pollution or that whole issue play? Was it a high level requirement? Or were you beginning to notice it and sort of take it on yourself?

KOTIS: Before we got there, and I don't know how many years previously, that process had started. Embassy New Delhi, and Mission India in general, had done work on air pollution, by getting air quality monitors installed at the embassy and at four other U.S. consulates around the country. So folks were aware of it. There's no way you can spend time in India and not be aware of it, because it's pretty extreme. I'm trying to think back as it's been ten years, but I don't really remember that there were any next steps planned at that point. Basically, I think the approach had been that they had set up these air quality monitors for internal consumption and Post management reasons so people in the embassy community could understand which days maybe they shouldn't let the kids go play soccer outside or things like that. I mean, obviously they'd done work. There was this database that we had access to that was for internal consumption, which included a password protected intranet site that Embassy folks could access.

Then I just started questioning, “why is this not more widely available?”, because like any post, you get to know other expats outside of the embassy community, you get to know people – Indians, in this case – from the local population. It was becoming an issue that people were talking about, at least in the circles that we were in. To me, it began to feel untenable that we had this information that was not available to others, especially other Americans, from a Consular point of view, but also more broadly in trying to figure out how to productively engage with folks who cared about the environment in India.

Q: Now, you arrived in August of 2013. Outside of the embassy in Indian media and so on. Initially with the Indian contacts you had, were you able to begin to find allies, or people who could amplify messages on air pollution?

KOTIS: Yeah, I mean, definitely as I was out meeting contacts, getting to know the lay of the land, I began to ask questions, talk to people, and see who cared about it. The Indian government had set up their own air quality monitors, but the data from them was not easily accessible. Most people were in the dark about what the pollution levels were. They could tell it was a bad day. But they didn't really have any numbers because the Indian data was hard to access and hard to interpret if you were not a scientist.

Finding a way to make our data more widely available seemed like something we should be doing. I mean, the embassy works on a whole bunch of health and environmental issues. It's not like we as a mission didn't try to work collaboratively with the Indians on addressing some of the challenges they had. So luckily, for me, also within the embassy itself, the health attache, also became very interested in it. I started working with her, and we started talking. There were others who thought, "yeah, we should do something," but there was also this feeling that the decision had been made on high, they didn't want to ruffle feathers. India is a complicated country, it's a complex place. The U.S. has a lot of different issues and objectives that it's pursuing. I think it was viewed in a typical State Department way, given that State is an inherently cautious institution. In general, I got the impression that nobody really felt that the benefits would outweigh the costs of making the data public. There were concerns that raising this issue in a public way could be viewed as embarrassing to the Indians, and it would become a point of tension rather than collaboration. In the midst of all that, this is before we went for anything, there was what was known as the Khobragade affair where the Indian Deputy Consul General in New York was arrested by U.S. authorities on charges of visa fraud having to do with bringing in, I think, domestics. That caused a major rupture in U.S.-Indian relations. So obviously, during that period, anything to do with what I was hoping to accomplish on air pollution was put on ice. It took some months but once that issue was resolved, and the level of bilateral tensions had dissipated, the broader political environment was more favorable to consider pursuing this again.

Q: You're slowly putting together an idea that it's time to propose both within the embassy and to the department, the idea of publicizing our air quality monitor results. How often?

KOTIS: Well, I mean, they were updated, I can't remember exactly if it was hourly, but it was a real time sort of monitoring. If you got on the website, you could see at eight in the

morning, it was very unhealthy or whatever. By noon, it was hazardous or whatever, it is keyed to the EPA's air quality index. I think the other thing I wanted to mention was that, obviously, this has to do with climate change policy. At the same time that all that was happening, we – the U.S. government –were trying to get India on board on climate change. I had felt that a lot of the arguments that were being used at the time were going to fall on deaf ears because it was a lot of the same arguments that you have with the G-77, the developing countries, in general. Their perspective was, "you guys all had your industrial revolution, you polluted like crazy, and then you did your stuff and now you don't want us to be able to do it." So we began to try to look for ways to engage that said, "Well, you can grow your economy and address this environmental and health challenge." There was a conference that I think had been going on for a few years. I don't think it was the first time they met. I can't actually remember precisely but it was an India-California initiative where officials from California and the California Air Resources Board came to Delhi and recounted the level of pollution that Los Angeles and other cities in California once faced and the steps they had taken to tackle that while growing the economy. I was looking for examples like that where you can say, "this is not unique, there have been other cities and countries that were faced with severe air pollution problems, they were able to address it and it didn't kill their economic growth". That became part of the way I thought would be useful to engage with it. At the same time, when I was dealing with Todd Stern's office.

Q: Mention who Todd Stern is.

KOTIS: Todd Stern at the time was the U.S. Special Envoy for Climate Change. So, he was the main guy in the State Department who was going around the world trying to get support for a comprehensive climate change agreement. I was dealing with folks in his office and I made the case, and they became convinced of it, that it would be useful to include air pollution cooperation as part of our broader climate change dialogue with India because the sources of air pollution were also many of the same sources that were driving climate change, whether it was coal burning power stations or other things that needed to be tackled. To help make the case for India to transition to a cleaner economy, cooperation on air pollution would be part of that.

Q: In India, the principal sources of the pollution were large industrial concerns not so much the individuals in many, many villages who burn wood or other natural resources for heat or for cooking?

KOTIS: I mean, it was all of the above frankly, in the wintertime especially in North India, where it can get pretty chilly. People would be burning whatever they could burn, if they were living on the streets or living in very simple dwellings. You would have in

the wintertime people burning plastic, just because it combusts and creates heat. Also in Punjab, in the north, there was an annual burning of the crop stubble to burn it back. That would end up usually, perennially, causing huge air pollution spikes in North Indian cities and throughout North India. As all this was happening, we got to know a scientist, Dr. Josh Apte from Berkeley, who had been studying air pollution in India for several years. He was disaggregating the pollution sources based on chemical composition. He was beginning to figure out how much of the air pollution was from each of those different sources, whether it was coal burning power plants, or exhaust from cars burning poor quality fuel, or other sources. When you can disaggregate it, then you can figure out the most economically efficient way to reduce the burden of air pollution. Anyway, after we got to meet him, we arranged with others to have him brief the country team and to brief the Ambassador, because we thought he had a very powerful presentation that was comprehensible, and very logically laid out. That happened, and it actually helped galvanize people to begin to understand, or at least it put it in a context where U.S. Ambassador Nancy Powell, and others felt like "yeah, we can do something, we should do something." So between having scientific data packaged in a way that was helpful, and then having it tied to an economic growth message and then tied to the broader priorities of the Obama administration on climate change, I was able to make the case that "yeah, we should do this for all these reasons." Eventually, Ambassador Powell and the leadership of the South Asia Bureau (SCA) at State in DC agreed to it and we made the decision to start making the data public.

Q: Alright. To go back one second, you described a lot of the background in terms of the arguments that you put together over time in your contacts and so on. Was another one of the arguments, the fact that other countries that were heavy polluters, China comes to mind immediately, we were also doing air quality monitoring and making that public in other countries?

KOTIS: At the time, I think China was the only place where that was happening. One of the outgrowths of what we did in India was that the State Department and EPA agreed to launch a broader program internationally to build out a network of air quality monitors at U.S. diplomatic missions especially in high polluting countries. I mean, if anything, I think that the China experience made folks in SCA a little skittish because when the U.S. Embassy in Beijing had started to make its air quality data public, it did cause some tensions with China. I think the calculation was that they definitely didn't want to repeat that. Or at least they didn't want to deal with that, as part of the array of issues they were dealing with in India. But at the time, I think China was the only place where we had publicized our data.

Q: The other question in terms of marshaling your arguments was, were there other embassies or other international organizations that were making public air quality numbers?

KOTIS: The World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Bank. There were international studies that were coming out that were showing that India had the worst air pollution, at least among all the ones that they were monitoring. There might have been some worse places, but New Delhi was at the top of the list that they published. This was happening at the same time. Then also, some of the international press was beginning to focus on it as well. The New York Times correspondent, who we knew, was writing about it and it was really becoming an issue within the diplomatic expat community and among Indian, I don't wanna say elites, but folks that diplomatic folks would interact with. Some of those studies also began to create this sense that something had to be done. Especially when India was being shown to be in quite a perilous situation with air pollution. So, yeah, thanks for reminding me about that.

Q: Now, once again, looking at the context of the moment when you are beginning to make this argument, were there other exogenous factors in India, that were sort of challenges or reasons why you might get pushback; elections or other social activity that caused concern or hesitation?

KOTIS: There were elections and current Prime Minister Modi was elected during that time. And there was the Khobragade affair, which then caused significant tensions. I would say those were probably the biggest ones. I mean, Khobragade was for sure. At the height of the Khobragade affair the Indian government was doing things like removing security barriers from in front of the embassy and taking other steps that frankly, were pretty worrisome. I don't remember any specific threats, but in a place like New Delhi, obviously, you could envision all kinds of scenarios where something could happen inadvertently or something that was an accident might all of a sudden spiral into something else. There were a lot of things to think about. That was the environment that I was operating in when I was pushing that we should publicize our air quality data. It was in that context that I was getting some negative reactions. At the time I don't remember that there was a lot of support from high up in the embassy. It was just sort of like, “No, we're not going to do that kind of thing”. And I just wasn't comfortable with that. I can be a bit persistent.

Q: Okay, but in terms of timing now, from the beginning of when you began to coalesce your argument, to the time when the embassy, the top officials of the embassy, as you mentioned, began to come around to supporting it. Roughly how much time elapsed?

KOTIS: I guess it was about a year. I'm trying to think exactly. I mean, I was there for two years. And actually, we curtailed the third year because air pollution was such that we just didn't want to endure it more than those two years.

Q: And of course, with small children, they're among the most vulnerable.

KOTIS: Exactly, our daughter was already in college. Our son was in ninth grade. The timing of our assignment was that if we had stayed three years, we would have moved when he was finishing eleventh grade. Then it was really a question of whether we were going to extend our posting and stay for four years so he could graduate from the same school, or leave earlier so he wouldn't have to go to a new school just for 12th grade. In the end, we just felt four years for us was more than we wanted to do.

Q: Okay, so during your two years, you're slowly building momentum, you're finding allies, in the embassy, and so on. Then what was the tipping point? What happened in terms of your being able to advance this idea and have it become successful?

KOTIS: I'm trying to remember exactly if there was one single tipping point or not. I think probably when Todd Stern's office thought that cooperation on air pollution would be a productive and useful avenue to have as part of our broader climate change policy, I think that helped elevate it. When I was able to convince them that this was something that made sense, I think that then gave it some added heft that was beyond like, just the mission's care of its own people or India-specific policy. It became part of a broader strategy, because India with regard to our climate change diplomacy was a big, important player that Todd Stern and his team were trying to bring on side in the international climate negotiations. I think that was probably a tipping point, all the other things contributed and laid the groundwork for it. The data was becoming more easy to utilize, there was the economic component to it, an economic growth message component. I think just the growing sense that we should do something, that this was too important an issue for the U.S. to remain silent about, that the silence could be construed as meaning that we didn't find this issue to be important. My calculation was that over time, it would be helpful and good for the U.S. to be seen on the right side of this issue. And not just to be "tsk tsking" and kind of looking down on India, like "you have this horrible problem, you fix it," but rather to offer some ways forward where we could work together and share information on clean energy technology and other things. It became clearer, as time went on, that there were these things where it could be latched on to other parts of our diplomatic engagement strategy more broadly.

Q: Mentioning clean energy technology. There are international, private, voluntary organizations or grant giving organizations and I'm thinking of this CEO of Microsoft

who's involved in all kinds of development activities and others like that who behind the scenes offer all kinds of funding support for new ideas in that. Were there any particularly visible ones that you were also watching or talking to?

KOTIS: As far as NGOs? Gosh, there probably were and I'm just not remembering it.

Q: Alright, to go back to the tipping point, was there a single cable or a single written piece that you sent to Washington? In other words, how did you document what your proposal was?

KOTIS: I never sent a dissent channel cable. That is one thing people have asked me over time. So I didn't do that. I remember eventually, once we had the Ambassador and Post leadership on board, I first wrote a decision memo, internally, laying out why we should go forward with it. Then once I had that, then I took that memo and turned it into a cable for Washington. I don't have that cable. I haven't looked at that cable in ten years, I can't remember exactly what was in it. But I think I was laying out a lot of the things that I've mentioned previously of how this all ties together. Eventually, we got a response from Washington that said, basically, "Yeah, go ahead. Let's do this." The timing of when we started publicizing was a little bit interesting, because air pollution in New Delhi and in India generally is, by American or European standards, very high all the time every day, even in the "low pollution" seasons. Any day in Delhi would be considered a major air pollution event in the United States or in Western Europe. We started publicizing the data, I think it was maybe June or July, which is right around the time when the monsoon is starting..

Q: June-July 2014?

KOTIS: In 2014, yeah. So that's when the air is the least dirty, mainly because there's rain. The rains clear out some of the air each day. When we first made the data public, we didn't do a lot of fanfare, we didn't do a lot of public diplomacy, it was just sort of all of a sudden it was out there. Through word of mouth, we just would mention it to people, and people just started noticing and talking about it. It wasn't until later in the fall, like October, November which is when typically when air pollution levels really begin to spike, around Diwali. That's a time when they're setting off fireworks which further adds to air pollution levels. Also this coincides with a kind of cyclical time when the air pollution really spikes for atmospheric reasons. So when that was all happening, then the Indian press started covering it. They started, publicizing the U.S. Embassy air quality data. It became a topic on their evening political talk shows. So it began to take on a life of its own. Which was good to see because it showed that there really was a latent interest in trying to address this. Once the data was out there, it became easier, I think, for people

to debate it, because they could assign it with a number. My wife and I, our first Foreign Service posting was in Jakarta '92-'94, which also had really, really bad air quality. But there were never any numbers to know how bad it was on any given day. So we never really knew how bad. It was just like if you were out too long, you'd get a headache or things like that. I think having the data that showed what the number is today, it became easier for people to discuss it in an intelligent way.

So, I think it really did help contribute to a broader discussion. My wife was very involved with a group that she helped start along with some other folks that were doing NGO work and trying to raise public awareness on air pollution. That also, I think, got more legs and more support. Some folks in the Indian community that we as diplomats interacted with a lot, it became a topic whether it was at cocktail parties or dinner gatherings or events. People were noticing that the information was out there. It began to take on the momentum that I was hoping it would, and it was very satisfying to see that it did.

Q: Did you get pushback also from elements of the Indian government expressing irritation or blowback?

KOTIS: Yeah. I mean, I don't remember anything---there was nothing like anyone wagging their finger. I mean, it became a way to begin to engage them a little bit more, because then we'd say, "Okay, well, can we go visit your air quality monitors, is there a way that maybe we can have our scientists meet with your scientists, and we can talk about stuff." So, if there were tensions, I was looking for ways to try to find a way to say we're not here to make you look bad, we're here to see if we can work together on this, like we work together on other health issues, poverty alleviation, etc, etc. I mean, that was the other thing. Obviously, with India, you have to be mindful of that because of the colonial history, they don't like being lectured to. You have to engage in a way that is respectful. I found that to be a productive way.

I'm just thinking back on it. So you had the Modi government at the national level, and then the municipality of New Delhi itself was ruled by a different political party. So there was some tension there, between those two different political parties as to who was responsible for the pollution in New Delhi. We were just trying to engage with all of them, finding ways to meet with them and see if there were ways we could work together.

Q: Sort of a crowning end to this, I think, was the visit of President Obama, shortly after Modi got elected, at which point, again, the international media and the State Department itself could refocus on the benefit, hopefully of what you had proposed.

KOTIS: Yeah, absolutely. President Obama was invited for a state visit. His visit, after Modi was elected, was an opportunity then, to have this as part of the array of cooperative agreements that came out of his visit. That happened from the India specific side, I mean, it was more working with EPA setting up some clearly defined avenues of cooperation. Then at the same time, the Obama administration decided to elevate air pollution more broadly and to agree on this kind of State Department-EPA joint initiative to put air quality monitors in other countries. That was I think, a result of President Obama's visit that all then moved forward. So it went from this issue that had to be challenged internally to all of a sudden it became something that became acknowledged as a valuable part of our diplomatic work not just in India, but as part of a broader kind of U.S. international engagement strategy on climate change and economic growth etc, etc.

Q: In your article in the Foreign Service Journal, back in 2014 or 2015. You lay out all of the steps you took, all of the things you felt you needed to do to change the policy to move it along to get agreement for publishing the air quality, have I overlooked anything in the work you did to pull all your arguments together, put them forward and so on?

KOTIS: I don't think so. There was a lot of initial sympathy or support, like, yeah, that'd be great if we could do that. But nobody really wanted to rock the boat too much, or felt that it was really their issue to push. I guess, what I did was help activate a general feeling that was out there. But that nobody had really stepped forward to really push too hard.

Q: Then looking back on this work, roughly ten years ago, how do you feel about it now, in terms of, if you followed it at all, subsequent developments that your work has brought about?

KOTIS: For the first few years afterwards, I definitely, kind of kept an eye on things. It was satisfying to see the number of U.S. diplomatic missions that were highlighting this and working on it. I have to admit, the last few years, I haven't followed it so much. The funny thing, and it's just the way things are, was that the year I won AFSA's Constructive Dissent award, I was also given the State Department's Frank E. Loy award for Environmental Diplomacy and then I also got a Superior Honor Award for the same work. I was awarded three times. Twice, I was flown to DC to get the awards on the seventh floor. There were ceremonies where it wasn't just me, it was a bunch of people who were getting awards that day, with the overall message being that "we're here to acknowledge and honor the best and brightest and the people that we should be proud of and we're here to acknowledge their great work". Then a few years later, I got tic'ed out, I never made it across the threshold to the Senior Foreign Service. Part of that is probably my own fault for choosing to do a lot of environmental work when I was a political coned

officer. The timing at the time that I got tic'ed out was also during the period when the Trump administration was slashing promotion rates and all that. I don't know that dissenting hurt me, but it certainly didn't help me enough that I'm still in the Foreign Service.

Q: They're all kinds of vagaries in, as you mentioned, that affect your potential for being promoted into the Senior Foreign Service. If you were advising someone now about doing the same kind of thing you did, what would be the recommendations you'd make?

KOTIS: I think you should definitely do it. In the State Department you have to pick your issues, you can't be a dissenter on everything. Because eventually people will probably not want to work with you on this, that, and the other thing. I think you have to pick and choose and figure out what's really important, and how far to push things. If you think you have a good argument to make, make it but figure out who is on your side and figure out who would be against the idea, but try to understand it through their perspective and figure out if there is a way where we can address this. Because, it's generally, this is typical State Department mindset, where you say "on the one hand this and then on the other hand that", so, I think you have to acknowledge that if people are opposing an idea they probably believe it for what they view as good reasons and but maybe you can help address whatever concerns they have. So I would say whatever stage of their career, people should stick to their guns when they think they're right. If you don't succeed at first in convincing, then figure out if there's another way to bolster your argument or add to it later on. Not necessarily everything can happen all at once. I mean, it's a slow moving organization in many ways, and you're just slowly trying to redirect things on a particular issue. But yeah, I think it's important. I think you want to maintain your sense of personal integrity. There's lots of times where you have to salute and say, "yep, we're gonna just do that, whether I like it or not". But different issues have different levels of complexity and whatever. For me, this was an issue that I felt was worth fighting for. I have no regrets. I feel satisfied that we helped move things. At the same time, the air quality problems in India are probably as bad as ever. I don't know whether we actually got the end result we had hoped for. But if there are going to be improvements in the future, I think we helped contribute to it. It may take a while. But I feel content about that.

Q: In your post foreign service life, have you continued any work in the environmental field?

KOTIS: So after I left State, I worked for a couple of years for the Environmental Defense Fund NGO. My work there was not focused on air pollution per se, but a lot of it

was on methane mitigation, in the oil and gas industry. I did that for a couple of years. Now, I'm happy to enjoy retirement and enjoy our property here on the Cape.

Q: I asked because often when a Foreign Service Officer retires, they have skills and talents that are transferable to a post Foreign Service, professional career of some kind. It's interesting that you were still motivated enough to and had the skills to continue the work and although, it wasn't directly related to air pollution. It was adjacent, as they say these days.

KOTIS: The work I was doing for the Environmental Defense Fund also was looking for practical solutions to problems with the environment. I mean, it's one thing to be advocating for change, and marching for change, or whatever. In the end, if there's going to be solutions, someone's got to come up with some practical ways that it can actually happen. I was attracted to that aspect of the work when I was working for EDF, and then well COVID happened and then life happened.

Q: World historic event that turns everything upside down. All right, so unless you have any final thoughts, I think we can end the interview here.

End of interview