

The Future of Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament

remarks by

Dr. Christopher A. Ford
Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for WMD and Counterproliferation
U.S. National Security Council

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Good day, everyone. Thank you for inviting me, and for giving me the chance to offer some thoughts on the future of nuclear arms control, nonproliferation, and disarmament – at least as I see these issues from my position in charge of the Weapons of Mass Destruction and Counterproliferation Directorate at the U.S. National Security Council.

Nonproliferation

With regard to nonproliferation, the unprecedented stress facing the global nonproliferation regime is due not just to the ill will of proliferators and their enablers, but also to the failure of all of us in the international community to come to grips with proliferation threats faster than the proliferators themselves have been able to advance their programs. This slow-motion crisis has been building momentum for many years, and is a potentially existential one for the nonproliferation regime, which now faces grave challenges not just from the unresolved misbehavior of the proliferators themselves, but also from the follow-on incentives that such developments increasingly create for *other* states – pressures either to follow suit and weaponize directly, or to “hedge” their bets by developing dual-use capabilities that will make them into “virtual” weapons states deliberately hovering on the brink of weaponization, merely one crisis away from “breakout.” This is a recipe for great instability and danger.

The international community has tried to respond to these challenges, but as I have pointed out for years, it has had trouble putting *enough* pressure on a determined proliferator *fast enough* to make the necessary difference. With Iran, and especially with North Korea, the international community consistently has taken

long enough to impose responsive pressures that by the time any given pressure really pinches, the development of the threat has progressed to a point at which *that* degree of pressure is insufficient to do the job – and so the cycle continues, with the international community valiantly trying to respond, but always behind.

This failure has today thrown the nonproliferation regime into a slow-motion existential crisis that it is not yet clear it will survive. It is, I believe, the challenge of our generation to save it.

If we are to have a chance to save it, we need to break this cycle in which the international community always finds itself behind the curve, by redoubling our efforts against the proliferators themselves. This means, for instance, finally – and quickly – putting the kind of pressures on North Korea that might at long last convince it that weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles bring not security but rather ongoing cost, pain, and risk of the regime’s destruction – as well as convincing it that the path to the security, and indeed regime survival, lies through negotiating a verified rollback of those destabilizing threats. And it means doing something to address the long-term nuclear proliferation challenges that the Iran nuclear deal did not meet.

Beyond these essential moves against the proliferators, we need to do more to restore faith in the efficacy of our security alliances in the face of proliferator threats, to reduce the pressures that the international community’s failure to address these problems has placed upon other regional states to begin exploring “virtual” weapons state status for themselves – or worse. We need to bolster our conventional and nuclear “extended deterrence” security assurances, which were so helpful in the past in dissuading proliferation by regional players understandably worried about regional security challenges, as many of them understandably are today.

We also need to do more to bolster the norms and institutions of the global nonproliferation regime. This must include protecting them against the erosion of non-use and prohibition norms in *other* weapons of mass destruction arenas – such as with chemical weapons – as well as rescuing the arms control enterprise from the shadow cast upon it by Russia’s violation of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and abandonment of conventional arms control in Europe. We need to encourage *other* possessor states, such as India and Pakistan, to begin to develop

approaches to arms control amongst themselves, and we need to support the IAEA in its work to monitor compliance with nuclear safeguards around the world – and especially in Iran – to ensure that it has both the resources and the authorities it needs to do its job. And we need to prevent institutional and political bleeding from occurring as a result of the nuclear weapons “Ban Treaty,” which threatens to undermine nonproliferation institutions and the solidarity we need to show in meeting proliferation threats.

Finally, if and where we cannot forestall proliferation or roll it back where it has taken root despite the international community’s best efforts, we must deter aggression by new proliferators, contain their hegemonic ambitions, deny them the military advantages they seek through the acquisition of nuclear weaponry, and subject them to an ongoing international regime of constant pain and pressure to send the clear message that unlawful proliferation – and the corrosive use of the nonproliferation regime as a cover and a shield for nuclear weapons ambitions – is both unacceptable and incompatible with being a responsible player in the international system.

With robust counterproliferation efforts, moreover, we must ensure that adversary nuclear programs evolve and mature as slowly (and as expensively!) as possible, and that proliferators do not pass their illicitly-acquired weapons knowledge and capabilities on to others. And we must, of course, be prepared to defend ourselves and our allies *in extremis* in case our efforts to deter proliferator aggression fail.

That’s a tall order, I know. But I fear that unless we do rather well in all of these endeavors, we may finally see the nonproliferation regime succumb to today’s poisonous mix of direct and follow-on proliferation pressures – with the result that the cascade of proliferation predicted since the early 1960s, but largely forestalled for decades by our collective nonproliferation successes during the Cold War, might finally come to pass.

Disarmament

If that occurs, of course, we can pretty much forget about making further progress on nuclear disarmament – which is part of why I feel that nonproliferation

is the foundational discipline upon which both arms control, disarmament, and the peaceful use of nuclear energy depend. But let's assume we *can* roll back today's challenges of direct proliferation, and can forestall the follow-on proliferation that it threatens to catalyze. What can the world hope for in the field of disarmament?

On one level, the disarmament story might seem unremittingly grim, with every nuclear weapons possessor today hard at work modernizing their arsenals, with most of them – the United States and the two Western European nuclear powers being the sole exceptions – actually *increasing* the size of their nuclear holdings, and with the strategic environment having clearly veered in very troubling directions during the last several years. And indeed, the evidence is piling up that it's time to recalibrate in some way how the international community expects to have a chance eventually to see the “world without nuclear weapons” long sought by so many activists and statesmen since the dawn of the nuclear era.

As I have outlined in more detail elsewhere, the traditional post-Cold War approach of seeking to demonstrate disarmament *bona fides* by showing steady numerical movement toward elimination, while trying to avoid steps that could actually undermine the security of possessor states, has largely run its course and is no longer tenable under current security conditions. It was possible to make huge progress on disarmament after the tensions of the Cold War eased a generation ago, and this change in underlying strategic conditions bore happy fruit in huge reductions in global nuclear weapons – such that, in our case, the United States has reduced its arsenal by about 87 percent from our Cold War peak. But the weapons that we were able finally to treat as unneeded surplus due to the easing of Cold War tensions have now largely been dismantled, and a strategic environment once assumed to have become enduringly benign has lurched back in the direction of confrontation, territorial aggression and self-aggrandizement, and increasingly bellicose nuclear saber-rattling.

But I don't believe that the story is uniformly grim, and there may yet be a way to retain hope in a meaningful disarmament agenda, notwithstanding the intellectual and programmatic frailty of its traditional post-Cold War form. In our view in Washington, the best and most viable way forward lies not in a strict numbers-focused approach, but rather in one that draws upon the wisdom encoded in the NPT itself – the Preamble of which points out the need for the “easing of

international tension and the strengthening of trust between States ... in order to facilitate” disarmament. This phrasing – and the causal ordering it signals about *how* to advance disarmament – is the conceptual key to understanding what “effective measures relating to nuclear disarmament” we should pursue in accordance with Article VI of NPT.

That is, though it is certainly true that the huge numerical reductions made in the wake of the Cold War were “effective” measures in reducing nuclear dangers, as we look to the future, measures that focus upon resolving the international conflicts and rivalries that produce the perceived need for nuclear weapons are much more likely to be “effective” in facilitating future disarmament than focusing solely upon reducing the number of weapons still in existence. If there exists a viable road to disarmament in the current security environment, in other words, it surely must run through improving that environment through the amelioration of such adverse geopolitical conditions. If we can successfully address those conflicts and rivalries, reducing or even eliminating the weapons themselves may be possible; if we cannot, it’s hard to see how any weapons-focused agenda could succeed.

I am convinced that it is still possible to have a vision of the nuclear future that is fully compatible with our obligations under Article VI of the NPT and with longstanding hopes for eventual nuclear disarmament – and a vision that is, in reality, *more* conducive to making real and lasting progress on disarmament than the traditional numerically-focused post-Cold War approach. Our troubled world is, of course, far from the conditions that would actually make elimination possible, and a full flowering of the world envisioned by Article VI would require a strategic environment quite different from our world today. We also need to avoid being seduced by the temptations of panaceas such as the so-called nuclear weapons “Ban” treaty – with all its potential impact in hurting the nonproliferation regime, in damaging the U.S. alliance relationships that have helped keep the peace for many decades, and in making the eventual achievement of actual disarmament *less*, rather than more, likely.

But nothing requires that we give up on the possibility and the long-term goal of disarmament, either – nor on the hope of negotiating incremental downward steps over time when, and to the degree that, real-world conditions permit. We seek a new approach to disarmament dialogue, one that focuses on the development of measures

that may be effective in creating the conditions conducive to future nuclear disarmament negotiations. This new approach, which tries to address disarmament as a real-world policy problem and not just a question of political posture, is entirely consistent with the NPT, and I think it has the potential to end up being a *better* way to work toward a disarmament-facilitating “easing of international tension and ... strengthening of trust between States” than any other path available today. We invite broad engagement in this new dialogue to develop ways to help it fulfil this promise.

Arms Control

Until the day that such disarmament bears fruit, however, we will need to do better at how the world handles the risks, tensions, and potential instabilities of continued nuclear weapons possession. And this means we’ll have to relearn some of what we seem to have forgotten since the end of the Cold War about the importance and uses of arms control as a way to manage enduringly competitive arms race dynamics and promote strategic stability in a nuclear-armed world, and not just as a negotiated mechanism for achieving arms reductions.

Despite today’s worsening strategic environment – and despite Russia’s continuing violation of the INF Treaty, which casts a grim shadow upon the arms control enterprise as a whole – arms control does not have to disappear, and I think it still has the potential to play a pivotal role in preserving international peace and security in the world ahead of us. If we can resolve the INF problem and remove the shadow of distrust it has created, and if we can put aside the ahistorical post-Cold War conceit that arms control is principally about *cutting* rather than *managing*, there is surely a lot we can do to think creatively about old and new ways to use its mechanisms to direct arms competitiveness into channels that are more (rather than less) conducive to peace and stability.

From the perspective of strategic stability, for instance, and of reducing the dangers of accident or miscalculated escalation, raw numbers often matter much less than *what* sorts of system each participant possesses and *how* each system is deployed. Is this system or that system – or this practice or that practice – more stabilizing, or less stabilizing? What might it do to the parties’ incentives in a crisis? To the predictability and efficacy of their deterrent relationships and the chances of unintentional or inadvertent breakdown? To their capacity to assess and understand

their environment in ways that would permit rational decision-making even under demanding pressures? To their ability to control escalation, or the incentives or disincentives surrounding resort to force in the first place? How do the dynamics set in motion by such decisions affect how the participants will have to deal with each other thereafter? From the perspective of preventing conflict, these sorts of questions can be far more significant than simple questions such as whether or not each side has 1,500 deployed warheads, or 1,000, or whatever.

To be sure, the intellectual burdens of building a stability-focused arms control agenda are likely more challenging than the comparatively simple, linear mathematics of just trying to take a few more weapons out of commission in a progression that one assumes will simply plod forward inexorably into the future. Nevertheless, such ongoing reductions simply aren't available today as they were after the Cold War ended, and the complex stability dynamics involved in the interplay of possessors' choices about equipment, posture, and doctrine are precisely what we need arms control to learn how to handle in the generation ahead of us.

This kind of complex, contextual, stability-minded arms control may be very difficult, but I am convinced that it remains possible. With the emergence of new possessor nations, new and novel delivery platforms, new nuclear use doctrines, and new foundational technologies that can be applied with ease to the nuclear world, moreover, such arms control is perhaps more *necessary* than it has been for a long time.

Most critically, the strategic arms control game needs to expand beyond the United States and Russia. One could envision the types of arms control measures we used to stabilize our nuclear competition in the early days of the Cold War to be particularly applicable to stabilize regional competition between India and Pakistan, for instance. Similarly, should Russia return to compliance with the INF Treaty, one could envision a real need to expand the prohibition of dangerous and destabilizing intermediate-range missile systems globally, or to develop new and different mechanisms for reducing the dangers posed by such systems.

The emergence of new delivery systems, such as hypersonic weapons, will also challenge traditional notions of crisis stability, but in ways that lessons from both strategic and conventional arms control may be able to temper. And while there

has been much attention given to the dangerous Russian doctrine of using nuclear escalation to terminate a conflict, other nations are also developing new nuclear use doctrines, thresholds, and capabilities that could increase the likelihood of nuclear conflict. Finally, on the positive side, the development of new technologies such as global and commercial satellite imagery, advanced sensors, and ease of communicating and disseminating information might actually make arms control *easier* in some respects – or at least less burdensome in certain applications – than the traditional intrusive inspection regimes we associate with Cold War-era agreements. Believers in the potential of arms control need to learn how to navigate on this new terrain.

Conclusion

So that, then, is what I would throw out for discussion here today on the future of arms control, nonproliferation, and disarmament. We clearly face great challenges, and these problems probably demand from us – together – an agenda different from the road many appear to have assumed we would be traveling, back when the strategic environment seemed enduringly benign and we imagined we could put competitive nuclear tensions behind us.

But it is the task of strategy to respond to changes in the environment – and try to re-shape that environment so that it ends up being less threatening, and more manageable, than before. If we are realistic, creative, and diligent – and if we are willing to pivot, as needed, away from conventional wisdoms that have outlived their validity – I believe it will remain possible to meet these challenges in the nuclear arena for many years to come.

Thank you for listening. I look forward to our discussions.

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