The International Relations Committee held an off the record meeting with Dr Christopher Ford, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation, US Department of State, on 12 December 2018. Dr Ford has made available the text of his opening remarks (which drew on his remarks to the conference at Wilton Park on 10 December 2018, ‘The nuclear non-proliferation regime – towards the 2020 NPT Review Conference’). These opening remarks are reproduced below.

The Structure and Future of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty
Dr. Christopher Ashley Ford
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House of Lords, Palace of Westminster, London, United Kingdom
December 12, 2018

As delivered:

Good morning, Lord Chairman. It is a pleasure to be here to speak with you about a profound and abiding interest that our two countries share: the continued integrity and survival of the global nonproliferation regime. We have had this shared interest for many years, and for the last five decades, the centerpiece of our work together in this endeavor has revolved around the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons, or NPT — which was opened for signature 50 years ago last summer, and which will have been in force for half a century by the time of the NPT Review Conference in 2020.

I would like to outline for you our preparations for that Review Conference, but first I hope you’ll indulge me for a moment while I offer what I hope is a useful metaphor for thinking about the NPT and the complex relationship of its constituent elements.

I. Multiple Pillars, One Foundation

It has become commonplace, in recent years, to speak of the NPT as having “three pillars” — that is, three explicitly or implicitly coequal elements in the form of nonproliferation, disarmament, and the peaceful uses of nuclear technology. This “three pillars” formulation, however, is not intrinsic to the Treaty or part of its original understanding. It is no more than a turn of phrase that people happened to start using after a while, quite a few years after the Treaty’s negotiation, and for reasons merely of convenience.

It emerged after the U.S. made a proposal in 1984, at the Second Preparatory Committee of that review cycle, that the 1985 Review Conference have three main committees — dealing, respectively, with nonproliferation and safeguards, peaceful uses, and disarmament. Ten years later, at the NPT Review and Extension Conference, these three issues began to be referred to as the “three pillars” of the NPT. But that’s it. The phrasing was just an artifact of choices of convenience about nothing more grand than how to organize Review Conference meetings.

“Three pillars” phrasing, therefore, in no way represented any kind of doctrinal or philosophical conclusion about the architecture of the NPT, and with good reason. Unfortunately, it has nonetheless been mistaken for such, and has helped lead subsequent generations to forget important truths they need to remember if the nonproliferation regime is to thrive or even to survive.
The imagery of “three pillars” misleads because it tends to suggest coequality, much as three legs might support a simple stool — which is to say, equally indispensably, and in such a way that one cannot extend or shorten any one leg without making corresponding adjustments to the other legs. This, I would argue, is quite profoundly mistaken, not to mention dangerous to the health of the NPT regime.

In fact, the NPT’s nonproliferation, disarmament, and peaceful-use aspects are not at all like three separate legs of a stool. To my eye, the better image here is that of building vital structures upon a foundation — that is, upon a base without which those two additional vital structures would collapse.

As the name of the “Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons” suggests, the conceptual and structural core of the NPT is nonproliferation, and this is the foundation upon which rest the two supported “structures” of nuclear disarmament and peaceful uses. At risk of belaboring the analogy, one might perhaps think of peaceful uses as some kind of granary or storehouse, which enriches the surrounding population — but which cannot fulfil this vital function if it is not built upon a solid foundation and thus falls into ruin. Disarmament might similarly be thought of as something akin to a stairway: a structure that we hope will lead us up to a better and brighter future — but which cannot fulfil this vital function if not built upon solid rock.

Both peaceful uses and disarmament require a foundation of nonproliferation assurances if they are to produce for mankind the prosperity and safety envisioned in the NPT. The potential power of nuclear technology is such that the widespread sharing of nuclear materials and know-how would be neither safe nor sane if one could not rely upon sound assurances that these things would not be lost, stolen, or misappropriated for non-peaceful purposes. And today’s weapons possessors would surely never agree to relinquish their own nuclear arsenals were they not confident that other states would not thereafter build such weapons themselves. Both of those two “pillars” thus are neither coequal with nor do they compete with nonproliferation. In truth, they depend upon nonproliferation.

This is not to dismiss the importance of peaceful uses, nor of disarmament. To the contrary, they are of enormous importance, and it is in part precisely for the benefits these aspects of the Treaty provide that we should all prize and preserve the integrity of the nonproliferation regime. But we should also not confuse ourselves about the relationship between these elements, because in misdiagnosing this relationship we could squander the chance to preserve the nonproliferation foundation upon which everything depends.

II. An NPT Agenda for 2020

So with that preface, let me briefly outline the U.S. diplomatic agenda as we approach the 2020 Review Conference. Our agenda begins with reaffirming the centrality of nonproliferation and the importance of preserving the integrity of the nonproliferation regime — not only for the security benefits that nonproliferation provides to all (and perhaps especially states in the developing world) by helping preclude neighbors and rivals from developing nuclear weapons, but also because nonproliferation is a sine qua non enabler for peaceful nuclear sharing and for disarmament progress. If they cannot rest upon a solid foundation of nonproliferation assurances, as I have noted, these two critical projects will collapse.

So our message is one of strengthening nonproliferation for all these reasons. This means, first and foremost, vigorous and resolute international cooperation to resolve the two biggest challenges facing the nonproliferation regime today: (1) bringing about the final and fully verified denuclearization of North Korea; and (2) finally ensuring that Iran never again has any pathway to a nuclear weapon. Remembering the way that these two countries’ illicit nuclear weapons programs have so profoundly destabilized two critical regions of the world, moreover, we must take steps to make it more difficult for countries caught in violation of the NPT to exercise the option of withdrawing from it — as North Korea did — to continue such programs.
We must also work tirelessly to strengthen the system of nuclear safeguards that are essential for credible nonproliferation assurances. This means ensuring that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has the resources and authorities it needs, and that it is both willing and able to exercise these authorities by following any and all credible information wherever the evidentiary trail may lead. We must ensure universal adherence to the IAEA Additional Protocol as the global safeguards standard, and promote universal adherence to nuclear safety and security best practices.

But precisely because we remain firmly committed not only to the success of the nonproliferation regime in itself, but also to disarmament and to sharing the benefits of nuclear technology, we cannot leave it at that. Accordingly, our NPT diplomacy also aims to highlight, promote, and accelerate peaceful nuclear uses worldwide — both in the generation of nuclear power and in the full range of health, industrial, medical, agricultural, and research applications that are facilitated by nuclear science, as I outlined in my remarks to the IAEA Ministerial on Science and Technology on November 28.

As for the important global project of trying to advance toward a world safely and sustainably free of nuclear weapons, as I outlined at Wilton Park two days ago on December 10, we have embarked upon an important new initiative to build a structured multilateral dialogue dedicated to ameliorating those conditions in the security environment that presently make it so difficult to achieve further disarmament progress. In sharp contrast to the counterproductive and magical thinking represented by the so-called nuclear weapons “Ban” treaty, our new initiative is based upon common sense, and upon our experience in achieving the extraordinary disarmament progress the world has seen since the end of the Cold War.

Just as it took the waning of Cold War tensions to make possible the dramatic reductions that have occurred in the U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals over the last three decades — reductions in which we ourselves in the United States, for instance, have cut back our arsenal by about 88 percent from its Cold War peak — one cannot expect to see the achievement of a nuclear weapons-free world without ameliorating those conditions in the regional and global security environments that still make the acquisition of nuclear weapons so attractive to some, and the idea of relinquishing them so alarming to others. So we have launched a new, global dialogue aimed at finding ways to do this — aiming, as the Preamble to the NPT itself exhorts us, to ease tensions and strengthen trust between states in order to facilitate disarmament.

As I outlined at Wilton Park, as part of our expanding initiative to foster conditions amenable to more nuclear disarmament progress, we are launching a new structured dialogue to bring together participating states to explore solutions to key practical challenges that stand in the way of achieving a nuclear weapons-free world. This is an exciting new effort, and — as an example of our genuine commitment to disarmament progress — we hope to have this structured dialogue in full swing before the 2020 Review Conference. It is our earnest hope that our historical cousins in the United Kingdom will stand side-by-side with us in this important endeavor.

III. Conclusion

I am grateful for the chance to outline these U.S. perspectives and priorities to you as we think about how our two great nations can best work together to strengthen the NPT in all its aspects.

Thank you for listening.