Dr. Brad Roberts served as U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Nuclear and Missile Defense Policy from 2009 to 2013 and in this capacity led the Obama Administration’s Nuclear Posture Review and had lead responsibility for its implementation. The views expressed here are his personal views and should not be attributed to any organization with which he is or has been affiliated.

**Key Assessments:**

1. *There is no better example of the erosion of the rules-based international order led by the transatlantic community for the last 70 years than what’s happening in the realm of disarmament diplomacy.* The rules and institutions of nonproliferation and disarmament remain, but their legitimacy is in growing debate. The commitment of leading powers to preserve and extend the regimes is in growing doubt. The effectiveness of the regime is in growing doubt. Alarm bells are ringing louder than ever about the possibility that the next NPT review conference, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the treaty (and the 25th anniversary of the decision to extend it indefinitely), will see a defection of disaffected states.

2. *The step-by-step process embodied in the NPT implementation process has lost credibility even if it has not lost value.* The agenda of practical steps promised every five years in NPT review conferences has been a major feature of that process. But NPT diplomacy has come face-to-face with ambitions and commitments that proved unrealistic in the circumstance. Neither the CTBT nor the FMCT will enter into force in the foreseeable future. There will be no Mideast disarmament conference. For those eager for near-term disarmament results, these dead-ends generate frustration, disenchantment, and a search for alternatives. But the step-by-step process has not lost its value as a way to make incremental progress toward disarmament, even if individual steps have proven unrealistic.

3. *Multilateral disarmament diplomacy has been fueled by bilateral US-RF arms control, which is at a major crossroads and may be at an end.* Russia’s leaders chose to develop and now deploy weapons foresworn under the INF treaty but not to exercise Russia’s right to withdraw from it. These choices are consistent with their broader approach to regional arms control in Europe—wholesale rejection of a set of agreements that Russia deems disadvantageous and as tools of Western encirclement and containment. Russia has poisoned arms control as a security tool for the West and even its return to INF compliance and an agreement to extend New START would not change this fact.
4. The ban treaty is a logical protest vote but also unhelpful and potentially damaging in its effect. As a protest vote, it reflects the dissatisfaction of some states (or their foreign ministries) with what they deem to be a shortage of good faith among the nuclear weapon states. It is likely to be unhelpful for the nonproliferation regime because it will give some states the political cover for abandoning their NPT obligations in protest (on the argument that they would remain constrained by the Ban obligations—which are more lenient on safeguards). The potential damage stems from ICAN’s stated aim of undermining U.S. extended nuclear deterrence in the near term (as evident in their strategy to target NATO basing nations). There is also some risk that ICAN’s disarmament advocacy, with its lopsided influence in Western democracies, may be fueling the perception in Moscow, Beijing, Pyongyang, and elsewhere that the West will unilaterally cede nuclear advantage to them.

5. Over many U.S. presidential administrations, there has been a continuing focus on working to create the conditions that might make disarmament possible in the future. This began with the Acheson-Lillienthal and Baruch plans in the 1940s, continued with the 1969 NPT, and is an essential element of continuity in the nuclear policies of the Obama and Trump administrations. The Obama administration built a strategy on the April 2009 Prague vision to create a string of conditions that might over 8-10 years enable other nuclear-armed states to join with the United States in taking additional steps to reduce the role and number of nuclear weapons. Those conditions could not be brought into being. Russia has re-embraced nuclear weapons, China has not embraced nuclear transparency while it modernizes and expands, North Korea continues to operationalize its nuclear deterrent, etc. This is not an argument to abandon the project; it is an argument to set expectations appropriately. Assistant Secretary of State Chris Ford’s campaign to Create the Conditions for Nuclear Disarmament is a logical follow-on.

6. Central to the nuclear disarmament project is the creation of an enforcement and compliance mechanism that would allow the nuclear-armed states confidently to disarm and ensure all states that no militarily-significant cheating would go undetected and unchecked. The ban treaty brings us no closer to a solution to this problem, as it is devoid of relevant provisions. This is not by accident, as the means do not exist. In the three decades since the end of the Cold War, multilateral disarmament enforcement has been in chronic crisis. The result has been a set of wins, losses, and draws that cumulatively inspire no confidence in the ability of the international community to effectively police a disarmed world. The important work of the U.K. and others to develop verification technologies usefully helps with the monitoring but not the enforcement and compliance challenges.

7. Nuclear diplomacy cannot be sustained without public support. Yet the public debate has been impoverished by decades of silence from national
leaders, of disinvestment in thinking institutions, and of dominance by policy extremists. Public opinion polling reveals that Western publics do not hold consistent views about nuclear policy (they are generally both opposed to nuclear weapons and supportive of nuclear deterrence).

8. *The NGO community has dominated much of the nuclear policy discussion in many (democratic) states.* And while that community reflects many different views, the NGO advocates for deterrence are very few and far between, whereas the NGO advocates for disarmament are very numerous. Their advocacy for additional steps to reduce nuclear dangers was well aligned with the commitment of Western governments to seize the opportunities presented by the end of the Cold War. But some NGOs continue to advocate for disarmament steps in ways that appear not to account for the renewal of major power rivalry and the emergence of new nuclear dangers, primarily in Asia. And of course they have no leverage in authoritarian states. Moreover, some NGO activists seek to circumvent the official disarmament process and resort to shaming and personal attacks to express their convictions—a strategy that has deepened, not narrowed the divides in the policy community.

9. *Nonproliferation and disarmament are best pursued as part of a comprehensive policy approach to the nuclear problem,* one that balances the use of political, diplomatic, and economic tools to reduce and where possible eliminate those dangers with military tools to deter the use of nuclear weapons. The only advocates for such a comprehensive approach are governments. They must exercise leadership in setting the terms of public and diplomatic debate about how best to ensure the needed balance and integration.

10.*In considering the requirements of effective disarmament diplomacy in the 21st century, we should be mindful of the lessons of the 20th century.* The impact of disarmament on peace was mixed. During the Cold War, disarmament diplomacy helped to constrain nuclear dangers. But during the interwar period (1920s and 1930s), it ended up contributing to the collapse of peace. In that era, the steps by the democracies to signal military restraint was received by revisionist leaders as a signal of weakness. And their steps to lead by disarmament example were received as opportunities to seize new military gains.

**Next Steps**

1. *Help to exercise intellectual and political leadership.* Along with the United States and NATO, the U.K. could usefully exercise leadership in the international debate about the future scope and objectives of nuclear disarmament diplomacy. Others are prepared to exercise leadership of a kind that does not serve our collective interests well. Policy leadership requires investing to create the necessary intellectual capital. It also requires political courage because the critics are numerous.
2. Insulate the disarmament project from the negative aspects of the Ban Treaty and ICAN’s advocacy. Supporters of the nonproliferation regime should try to minimize those negative aspects. This could be accomplished in part by inhibiting entry into force of the treaty, through a diplomatic strategy aimed at persuading signatories not to pursue ratification at this time. The U.K. should also counter the argument that it lacks the good faith to pursue nuclear reductions. It can usefully remind disarmament critics that the nuclear-armed democracies have taken many steps to reduce the role and number of nuclear weapons while a neighboring major power has reembraced nuclear weapons in a political and military strategy directly aimed at them and has violated almost all of its treaty obligations in order to gain unilateral advantages.

3. Help set realistic expectations for the 2020 NPT review conference. Some will set them too high; others will set them too low. A steady, pragmatic perspective on long-term factors is needed and will be difficult to maintain amidst the firestorm of NGO commentary. Regime leaders should put the focus on the practical barriers to disarmament in the current security environment, on the discussion of practical conditions initiated by U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense Chris Ford, and on a nuclear code of conduct and risk reduction agenda for the nuclear weapon states. They should reject the argument that successful extension of the regime can be won only on the basis of further unilateral concessions by the nuclear-armed democracies. They should also reject the argument that the success of a review conference is measured by whether or not it produces a consensus final document.

4. Help lead the exploration of what conditions need to be created to enable nuclear disarmament. Think of this as a series of steps—next steps on the pathway, last steps on the pathway, and all of the many interim steps. The U.K. can speak from practical experience. Anyone who has tried to create the conditions that would allow Russia and others to join in next steps has a compelling story to tell about just how challenging are those conditions.

5. Help lead the political discussion about nuclear weapons. ICAN and others are making powerful moral and legal claims. Their arguments are clear but not compelling; they require clear and compelling rejoinders. The public deserves a well-reasoned debate. Silence from the nuclear-armed states on these topics unhelpfully cedes the debate to others.

6. Show resolve and solidarity toward Russia’s noncompliance with its self-accepted arms control obligations. The U.K. has much to contribute to the project to define a comprehensive replacement regime for military restraint in Europe. It can also help to lead the alliance’s effort to adapt its deterrence and defense posture so that it remains fit for purpose in
light of developments in Russia’s military posture until and if a new restraint regime relaxes that requirement.

7. *Make the needed investments in intellectual bandwidth.* Recognizing that the nuclear problem is an enduring one, as is the need for a comprehensive, consensus-based approach, investments are needed to ensure that (1) the institutional bandwidth to ensure the needed policy integration, (2) the supporting institutional infrastructure to develop the needed intellectual capital (both governmental and non-governmental), and (3) future generations of defense and foreign policy experts attuned to the particular features of the nuclear problem.

8. *Re-balance transatlantic leadership roles.* In pursuing partnership with the United States on these matters, the UK must cope with the fact that the deep divisions in American politics are consequential for these matters as well. American leadership on these matters cannot be taken for granted. This provides an opportunity for others to exercise leadership.

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