On June 27, 2018, Senator Lugar delivered the opening remarks of a celebration to commemorate 50 years of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. His speech is below.

I thank John Tierney and the Center for Arms Control and Non-proliferation for organizing this event and for inviting me to share my thoughts on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. It is a pleasure to be here with so many good friends.

In June 2005, as Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, I commissioned and published an informal survey of experts on nuclear weapons, including many former government officials and others who would go on to positions of great responsibility. Among the questions that we asked was: “how many new nuclear weapons states do you anticipate will be added during the next 10 years.” Both the median and average response to that question was four new nuclear weapons states. Moreover, 69 of the 77 respondents who answered that question believed that two or more nuclear weapons states would be added in the next decade. Since 2005, of course, the only new nation to conduct a nuclear weapons test was North Korea. As measured by this survey, global non-proliferation efforts exceeded the expectations of the experts.

I anticipate that none of us feel complacent about this outcome. We understand that even if we have avoided a nuclear cataclysm, the difficulties of containing the risks inherent in nuclear weapons remain an existential problem for the planet. We know that broad cooperation between nuclear powers is at a low ebb, and the immediate problems associated with North Korea and Iran continue to occupy the global community. We also recognize that proliferation scenarios involving entire regions can cascade quickly if one nation breaks through the nuclear weapons barrier.

But even amidst these challenges it is essential to affirm that international non-proliferation agreements, norms, and oversight do work if they receive the sustained backing of the world’s governments. This non-proliferation work starts with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which has functioned for 50 years as an indispensable bulwark against nuclear risk and chaos. The Treaty, concluded during one of the most difficult periods of the Cold War, was a triumph of strategic foresight. It solidified a commitment to collective action on behalf of non-proliferation goals and
embraced the audacious principle that we could shape nuclear outcomes, rather than allowing uncontrolled circumstances and accidents to shape them for us.

Like almost every arms control agreement, the text of the NPT must be seen as a starting point, not a definitive end in itself. The words of the Treaty alone don’t guarantee that nuclear weapons will not spread. Successful outcomes under the Treaty require nations and individuals to commit to the collective vigilance and unity of purpose inherent in non-proliferation work.

Often we need to remember that the practice of foreign policy is seldom determined by its biggest events. When diplomatic history is written, the plot often focuses on diplomatic deals or high-profile summits. But these events make up a small slice of a nation’s foreign endeavors. And no amount of clever dealmaking can make up for a breakdown of the core elements of global interaction that encourage nations to resolve their disputes peacefully. These elements include alliances, trading partnerships, international agreements, diplomatic exchanges, international organizations, the promotion of human rights, and respect for international law. These are the sinews of foreign policy that give strong nations leverage and prevent global crises.

When the world community reaches the point of having to make tactical choices in a time of peril, it almost always faces a choice between bad options and worse options. The NPT is model for how to avoid a crisis in the first place.

Some may long for the simplicity of the pre-nuclear age when the vast oceans shielded the United States from most international risk. But in a nuclear world, we know that our national security is intertwined with what happens in the furthest corner of the globe. The United States must not only participate in world events – it must provide leadership.

As one of the authors of the Nunn-Lugar program, I have spent more than a quarter century thinking about the nuts and bolts of how nations denuclearize. My attitudes toward the enterprise of arms control has been affected by the time I have spent visiting remote areas in the former Soviet Union and locations in Asia, Africa, and Europe to bolster Nunn-Lugar operations. When one sees the complexities involved in cutting up a Russian SS-18 or dismantling a Typhoon ballistic missile submarine, one gets a clear picture of the effort and expense it takes to put the WMD genie back in the bottle. We have achieved amazing results in this work, but it is far simpler and far safer to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons in the first place.

I am heartened by the enthusiasm in this room for the NPT and for the hard work before us. I am confident that this conference will serve as an affirmation of the importance of U.S. leadership on nuclear issues and the responsibility of each of us to contribute to a more secure and prosperous future. I look forward to what we can achieve together.