Despite Donald Trump’s presidential election campaign rhetoric, the US still has a central role to play in international nuclear non-proliferation efforts. There is hope Trump’s defence officials and the international community will have a steadying influence on the new president.

During his election campaign, President Donald Trump made many questionable and potentially damaging claims on nuclear weapons. Now much of the world is waiting to see how his rhetoric will be reflected in policy. The extended nuclear deterrent was one area addressed by Trump. Having been a successful tool of non-proliferation for decades, hints of changes in Washington’s nuclear alliances have been alarming policymakers both in the US and in those states under its nuclear umbrella.

Trump could change this policy in a number of ways, from downgrading specific arrangements to asking allies for increased compensation. However, if Trump insists on enacting at least some of his campaign rhetoric, the removal of US forward-deployed nuclear weapons in Turkey could be an ideal option. It is an idea that has been around for some time, and it has gained prominence once again since the attempted military coup in Turkey last summer.

When the question of withdrawing nuclear weapons from Turkey has come up before, there have been two primary justifications: first, the domestic situation in Turkey poses high risks and would not ordinarily be accepted as a safe and secure nuclear hosting state; and second, the US nuclear capability, suspected to be based at Incirlik, cannot be delivered by either American forces stationed in Turkey or by the Turkish Air Force.

Although this operational limitation goes some way to reducing the risk posed by the domestic instability in Turkey, it does not completely override the risks posed by hosting nuclear weapons in an unstable country. Therefore, removal makes operational sense. Moreover, it has been reported that US forward-deployed tactical nuclear weapons have been stationed in Turkey under NATO nuclear-sharing arrangements for decades. Removing this US capability from forward deployment would allow Trump to implement campaign rhetoric while also bringing three benefits to broader nuclear policy.

The removal of this nuclear capability from Turkey could create a better footing for arms control with Russia. Second, it could open a much-needed pathway for dialogue with the advocates of a Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty. And finally, such a policy could be enacted without going against NATO or US interests. NATO’s primary objective is to provide collective security for all its members, so no one country’s security is prioritised over another’s. A way of ensuring this security is through the notion of extended nuclear deterrence. Unilaterally, the US is committed to maintaining a safe, secure and reliable nuclear deterrent. Removing nuclear weapons from Turkish soil would not damage these provisions as the country would still be covered by the Alliance’s nuclear umbrella.

**Giving Turkey What it Needs**

Any policy change cannot leave a void for Turkey or the southern flank of NATO: such a void would undermine the trust that member states have in the Alliance and may embolden NATO’s adversaries. As such, before changes to the deployment of nuclear weapons in Turkey are implemented, both the US and NATO will need to address any perceptions of abandonment that arise.

Trump’s designation as a NATO nuclear base is historically and symbolically important. It is a demonstration of Washington’s commitment both to Turkey and to the broader Alliance, a commitment that, from Ankara’s perspective, was damaged following the removal of the Jupiter missiles after the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. However, Washington, acting by itself and within NATO, should be able to reassure Turkey of its commitment to security.

One option is to strengthen conventional forces in Turkey, which are appropriate for the immediate threats that Turkey faces. Nuclear weapons are not useful for dealing with non-state groups such as Kurdish rebels or Daesh (also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS). By removing nuclear forces from Turkish soil, Trump can fulfill his rhetoric of reducing Alliance members’ dependency on the US nuclear arsenal in a manner that is acceptable for broader NATO postures. Indeed, by removing the costs of forward-deployed tactical nuclear weapons, there would then be a better case for enhanced conventional forces that could more appropriately address the immediate security concerns for the Alliance in the region.
However, Turkey’s recent statements casting doubt on the continued use of Incirlik Air Base by allied forces for the mission in Syria have further complicated the management of any proposed removal process; such statements already suggest that there is a fracturing between the Alliance and Turkey. Nuclear weapons removal could be interpreted as a reaction to such statements, further entrenching Alliance divisions. However, taking decisions in consultation with Turkey could help to limit the damage to Washington’s relationship with Ankara, and the broader NATO alliance.

Finding Agreement with Russia

Another benefit of removing the US nuclear capability in Turkey is that such an action may lead to a stronger prospect for arms’ control agreements with Russia.

Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the war in Eastern Ukraine, relations between Russia and the US and NATO have deteriorated. Moscow has suspended implementation of the Plutonium Disposition and Management Agreement, which committed Russia and the US to reducing their holdings of weapons grade plutonium. The Kremlin has also been accused of ‘nuclear sabre-rattling’ across NATO states and energetically pursuing nuclear weapons modernisation. The US also bears some responsibility for the situation – it too has programmes to modernise its nuclear triad, and has enforced sanctions against Moscow which have significantly contributed to the deterioration of relations. Both states are seriously diminishing the future prospect of successful arms’ control negotiations.

It remains to be seen whether Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin will have a fruitful relationship that bears mutual benefits, or whether their personalities will clash and lead to a deepening of the distrust between the two countries. Whatever the case, when Trump comes to engage with the complexities of nuclear weapons and arms control, the removal of nuclear forces from Turkey could be used as an olive branch. While this is unlikely to single-handedly result in a solution, it could be an important symbolic step by NATO to reduce tensions and kick-start further discussions on the issue.

Resurrecting the Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Agenda

The broader non-proliferation and disarmament agenda is also facing an impending crisis. A treaty on banning nuclear weapons will be negotiated this year at the UN. Although it is not clear what will be specifically included in the treaty, discussions will most likely occur without representation from nuclear weapons states and with only scant representation from those countries which benefit from the protection of nuclear alliances.

In this context, the divisions between the haves and have-nots are likely to increase – a division that the process has already further entrenched. Unless efforts to engage are made, these divisions will likely spill over into the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) review process, due to start again this year, further stalling consensus-based progress in this area. The impetus behind the Ban Treaty process thus far has come from the frustrations of non-nuclear weapons states feeling rightly disgruntled at the dwindling progress in the area of disarmament, something the nuclear weapons states are mandated to work towards, in good faith, under the NPT.

Although the removal of nuclear forces from Turkey would not rectify the slow-moving disarmament progress, it could have symbolic value, signal efforts of good faith, as requested by the NPT, and demonstrate a concrete move to reduce the number of countries hosting nuclear weapons.

Removing forward-deployed US nuclear forces from Turkey could seem like a dramatic change to the NATO posture and raise questions over whether it is best to let sleeping dogs lie. However, given the potential retreat from the Alliance by Trump, as well as Ankara’s domestic issues and the negative trajectory of arms’ control and disarmament progress, the policy community should seriously consider the benefits of removing nuclear weapons from Turkey.

Cristina Varriale
Research Analyst with RUSI’s Proliferation and Nuclear Policy Team.

She specialises in non-proliferation, deterrence policy and CBRN security.