President Trump's Foreign Policy Could Encourage Proliferation

By

Santiago Spadiliero

In a recent White House press conference, President Donald Trump expressed his desire to renew arms control negotiations with both China and Russia. This move seeks to cut the military spending of all countries involved in half. If successful, it could ease the competitive nature that has characterized US-China-Russia relationships. Still, Trump's overall foreign policy could actually lead to the opposite outcome, a new era of missile and nuclear proliferation among first-, second-, and third-world countries.

Nonproliferation has been the goal of America's foreign policy since the end of the Cold War more than three decades ago. At that time, the biggest concern was the possibility of the crumbling Soviet military apparatus being captured by rogue states, terrorist organizations, and other non-friendly entities that could use Soviet expertise and technological prowess to develop means to attack the United States. The Cooperative Threat Reduction Program (CTR), for instance, was started in 1991 to assist the Soviet Union and its "successor entities" to "destroy nuclear, chemical, and other weapons; transport, store, disable, and safeguard weapons in connection with their destruction; and establish verifiable safeguards against the proliferation of such weapons."

Since then, many more programs have been created to control exports of sensitive and dual-use materials. Regardless of the effectiveness of these programs, it might seem that the world has entered a new era of proliferation as allies and partners, among others, start to question the security commitments of the United States and the possible prospect of developing their own nuclear programs.

Whether the US would actively defend its allies and partners if attacked, thousands of miles away from American territory, has long stimulated debate. Now, more than ever, Ukraine and the Middle East are important centers of attention following their years-long conflicts and the involvement of the United States. In Ukraine, for instance, President Trump called for peace negotiations, allegedly, without the consent of Ukraine.

Amid these decisions, conflicting messages were shared by American officials on the issue. On the one hand, President Trump stated that "Ukraine may be Russian one day, or not," and that there were discussions on the possibility of a deal to provide the United States with part of Ukraine's mineral deposits in exchange for American weapons. On the other hand, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth stated that North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) membership for Ukraine is unrealistic and that the country should abandon its hopes of a return to its pre-2014 borders.

The fears running among Ukrainians and other European partners are shared. What if the US withdraws its assistance from Ukraine? What about the rest of the continent? On Monday, February 17, 2025, European leaders met to form a united front during an emergency meeting in Paris to discuss Trump's plans for Ukraine and the continent. In this meeting, the reliability of Europe's key transatlantic partner might be questioned. As this situation and the negotiations continue, many possible outcomes are certain to receive attention.

One of them includes the possibility of developing or expanding European nuclear programs, which is an idea floated for some time. For instance, Elena Davlikanova, from the

Center for European Policy Analysis, reported that "[d]uring his speech in Brussels on October 17, Ukrainian President Zelenskyy voiced what many Ukrainians are thinking, that in the war for its existence, Ukraine now has a choice between NATO membership or manufacturing nuclear weapons." If, according to the US Secretary of Defense, Ukraine's membership in NATO is dismissed, then the other viable option for Kyiv is clear. And so might be for other US partners and allies.

In the Middle East, furthermore, a similar situation could be addressed. Since the last violent exchanges between Israel and Iran, concerns were raised about the possibility that Iran may now finally develop its own nuclear program with the assistance of Russia. Moreover, President Trump's plans to expel ethnic Palestinians from Gaza and turn it into the "Riviera of the Middle East" could fuel concerns among Arab partners.

Along these lines, Arab states, friend or foe of the US, may acquire nuclear capabilities if they perceive their interests (regime survival, national integrity, sovereignty, etc.) are at stake and if they consider the growing US-Israel alliance a security risk. Iran could definitely see it this way, but what about the newly established Syrian government? The historical competition between Israel and Syria could now further expand as Islamist organizations now control the country.

Overall, two roads seem to be ahead of us. If the Trump administration's goal is to partially denuclearize China and Russia, then concessions ("sacrifices") will need to be made, which might include surrendering Ukraine to Moscow and, perhaps, Taiwan to Beijing—or at least the sovereignty claims of the South China Sea. If this is the case, the US alliance may tremble, encouraging US partners and allies to pursue their own independent nuclear programs. The other road leads to the support of US partners and allies but without facing real possibilities of engaging in arms control negotiations with either China or Russia.

In other words, the status quo would be maintained. The Trump administration would need to start evaluating these two paths ahead, but partners and allies should also play their part to convince the administration that they are not a burden to carry, and that keeping the alliance alive will also benefit the United States in the short and long term.

Santiago Spadiliero is a doctoral candidate at Missouri State University's School of Defense and Strategic Studies whose research is focused on great power competition, deterrence, and America's missile defense architecture.