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Nuclear Weapons in Turkey

Drivers of Existential Risk

In the realm of nuclear weapons policy, much emphasis has been given to shrinking the arsenal of the two largest players on the nuclear stage: Russia and the United States. However, not enough attention has been given to a more insidious threat, one that is just as capable of destroying the long term potential of humanity. Nuclear proliferation, the acquisition of nuclear weapons, is particularly destabilizing and exponentially magnifies the risk of nuclear war. In this essay I will demonstrate how the United States is actively contributing towards nuclear proliferation in the Middle East through its nuclear weapon deployments in the country of Turkey. I contend that removing these weapons is a crucial step for the United States to assert its commitment to nuclear safety in the Middle East and to minimize existential risk on the nuclear front. After examining the history of nuclear weapons in Turkey and the status quo, it will be shown how the continued deployment of these weapons is contributing towards proliferation in the Middle East. I will also demonstrate the dangers of nuclear proliferation and the detrimental effects that are already manifesting. Finally, I will present the actions that the United States and its NATO allies can take in order to combat the existential risk created by nuclear proliferation.

In the Cold War, the United States deployed thousands of nuclear weapons to five NATO countries — Belgium, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, and Turkey.¹ These tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) were designed to extend the umbrella of the US nuclear arsenal over the European NATO countries while simultaneously deterring nuclear attacks. Since then, the nuclear landscape has changed dramatically, and as a result the US has reduced the amount of weapons in each country, leaving just 20 in each as of 2021.² At the same time, according to Steven Pifer of the Brookings Institute, “President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey’s increasingly autocratic leader, has turned away from both Europe and the United States. He instead is actively cultivating a close relationship

¹ Ottavia Credi, “US Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons in Europe: Necessary or Obsolete?”, *American Security Project* (2019): 1.

² Hans M. Kristensen, Matt Korda, “Nuclear Notebook: United States nuclear weapons, 2021”, *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* (2021): accessed June 13, 2022, <https://thebulletin.org/premium/2021-01/nuclear-notebook-united-states-nuclear-weapons-2021/>

with fellow authoritarian Vladimir Putin, as evidenced by their eight meetings just this year.”³ It is becoming increasingly clear how Turkey’s interests no longer align with NATO.

Most critics of the US nuclear weapons in Turkey point out the risks to their physical security. Incirlik Air Base, where the weapons are stored, is a mere 70 miles from an active war zone in Syria, and there are numerous terrorist groups in the area. Although these concerns are compelling, few individuals in the media have spoken about the more pressing issue—the nuclear proliferation that these weapons are incentivizing. The weapons in Turkey are B61 gravity bombs, meant to be dropped from an F-16 or similar fighter jet in a local conflict. However, according to Jeffrey Lewis, director at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, “Neither Turkish aircraft nor U.S. aircraft in Turkey can deliver the bombs.”⁴ Thus, the only way these weapons could feasibly be used is for a US fighter to fly in from a different air base, load up the B61, and take off to strike the target.⁵ The sluggishness of this response means that these weapons will never be used for a retaliatory strike; once a nuclear strike is detected, there is simply too little time to react with gravity bombs. In that case, the United States would use its nuclear submarines or ICBMs, both of which require substantially less time to launch.⁶

Given these facts, what function do the nuclear weapons in Turkey perform? Mustafa Kibaroglu and Aylin Gurzel, professors and strategic researchers at MEF University in Istanbul, explain, “Many nonproliferation and arms control experts argue that the U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe not only enhance (rather than to deter) proliferation, but also undermine the fundamental

³ Steven Pifer, “It’s time to get US nukes out of Turkey”, Brookings (2019): accessed June 13, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/11/05/its-time-to-get-us-nukes-out-of-turkey/>

⁴ Jeffrey Lewis, “Should the U.S. Pull Its Nuclear Weapons From Turkey?”, New York Times (2016): accessed June 13, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2016/07/20/should-the-us-pull-its-nuclear-weapons-from-turkey>

⁵ Pifer, 2019

⁶ Erin Connolly, “U.S. Nuclear Weapons in Europe”, Center for Arms Control and Proliferation (2016) <https://armscontrolcenter.org/u-s-nuclear-weapons-in-europe/> accessed November 28, 2020

premises of the Nuclear NonProliferation Treaty (NPT).”⁷ The fundamental motivator for a country to proliferate is the country in question feels threatened by another nuclear weapon state, and consequently develops nuclear weapons of its own to defend itself. Although the twenty nuclear weapons in Turkey cannot be used for a retaliatory strike due to the timeline, they could feasibly be used for a localized first strike against any of the Middle Eastern countries. This possibility, Kibaroglu argues, is increasing the risk of proliferation in the Middle East. Even worse, it appears to be already manifesting. Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Libya have pursued nuclear weapons capabilities in the past.⁸ Since 2019, Iran has accelerated its nuclear program, exceeding the boundaries of the Iran nuclear deal and making it easier for them to develop nuclear weapons.⁹ According to the National Herald, there is substantial evidence that Pakistan has been manufacturing and selling uranium-purifying centrifuges.¹⁰ Like the existential risks of artificial general intelligence and climate change that professor Toby Ord discusses in *The Precipice*, when it comes to nuclear proliferation in the Middle East, the point of no return may be closer than previously thought.

Once nuclear proliferation starts in the Middle East, it could easily spiral out of control. The more countries that obtain nuclear weapons in the area, the more justification there is for the remaining countries to develop their own nuclear weapons. Nuclear scientist Theodore B. Taylor once wrote, “Nuclear proliferation - be it among nations or terrorists - greatly increases the chance of nuclear violence on a scale that would be intolerable.”¹¹ Consequently, the international

⁷ Mustafa Kibaroglu and Aylin Gurzel, “US Nuclear Weapons in Turkey: Yankee Go Home?”, Taylor and Francis Online (2012) <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/19934270.2008.9756524?needAccess=true> accessed September 8, 2020

⁸ Robert Einhorn, “Nuclear Energy and Proliferation in the Middle East”, The James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies (2018): <https://www.nonproliferation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/180711-us-israel-nonproliferation-dialogue-robert-einhorn.pdf> accessed January 26, 2021

⁹ Anti-Defamation League, “The Iranian Nuclear Threat: Why it Matters”, Anti-Defamation League (No date given): <https://www.adl.org/resources/fact-sheets/the-iranian-nuclear-threat-why-it-matters> accessed March 5, 2021

¹⁰ The National Herald, “Turkey’s plan to rope in Pakistan for nuclear weapons shows aggressive intent”, The National Herald (2021): <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/international/turkeys-plan-to-rope-in-pakistan-for-nuclear-weapons-shows-aggressive-intent> accessed May 13, 2021

¹¹ Theodore B. Taylor, “Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons”, (1988): 1

community must do all that it can to reduce the possibility that the Middle Eastern countries proliferate. A key first step would be to remove the nuclear weapons from Turkey.

What can be done to increase awareness of this issue? The United States has removed its nuclear weapons from Turkey in the past without incident. It could easily do so again with a single C-17 transport aircraft.¹² In order to put pressure on the United States Federal Government to change its policy towards Turkey and take action on this risk, NATO countries could declare their support for the removal of the weapons. Grassroots advocacy organizations could do the same. As for the remaining NATO deployments in Germany, Belgium, Italy, and the Netherlands, there is little risk of nuclear proliferation. Since Europe is more stable and cooperative than the Middle East, the likelihood that any of the surrounding countries would break the NPT and pursue nuclear weapons is comparatively quite low.

The recognition of the existential risk that nuclear proliferation poses to humanity necessitates decisive action. Especially when the path towards safety is so clear, as is the case in Turkey, there is especially good reason to proceed. Professor Ord says as much in *The Precipice* when he discusses the importance of cost-effectiveness in risk reduction.¹³ Although the probability of an existential catastrophe triggered by nuclear proliferation may be low, the simplicity and ease of removing the weapons from Turkey should make it a top priority for policymakers. Safeguarding humanity's future demands that we consider all possible opportunities to mitigate existential risk. In Ord's words, "How we react to this risk is up to us."¹⁴

¹² Hans M. Kristensen, Matt Korda, *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* (2021)

¹³ Toby Ord, *The Precipice*, (Hachette Books, New York: 2020), 180-181

¹⁴ Ord, 29