Australia’s stance on nuclear deterrence leaves it on the wrong side of history

There has been much hand-wringing at the thought of Donald Trump becoming US president. If, by some miracle, Trump succeeds in November, he will have his hand on the nuclear trigger.

But this concern, while great political fodder, is dangerously simplistic. It presupposes there are “safe hands” when it comes to nuclear weapons. There are not.

The US has around 7,000 nuclear weapons. Hundreds of these can be launched within minutes. While the global community has outlawed other indiscriminate weapons of mass destruction, nuclear weapons are yet to be banned.

The Cold War’s MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction) doctrine has morphed over the years into a framework of nuclear deterrence. Many governments globally have played a double game: supporting nuclear disarmament on the one hand, while relying on a nuclear defence on the other.

One such government is Australia’s. Despite consecutive governments insisting they support nuclear disarmament, Australia’s reliance on Extended Nuclear Deterrence (END) means it is frustrating attempts at a total ban.

When defence conflicts with deterrence

END is based on the assumption the US would offer a nuclear response to Australia as a select protégé ally in the event of a nuclear threat or attack. These arrangements are publicly documented between the US and NATO states, Japan and South Korea.

The first official articulation of the position in Australia is in its 1994 Defence White Paper. This professes a reliance on, and support for, a US nuclear capability to “deter any nuclear threat or attack on Australia”.

Importantly, the paper also noted that reliance on END was an “interim” measure until a total ban on nuclear weapons could be achieved. Each subsequent defence white paper has continued to assert this reliance on US nuclear weapons.

The 2016 Defence White Paper created more ambiguity about the END arrangement. It claimed:

Only the nuclear and conventional military capabilities of the United States can offer effective deterrence against the possibility of nuclear threats against Australia.

After 22 years of white paper reliance on END, it is no longer a temporary aberration. The risk is we normalise both the need for and use of nuclear weapons.

Australian defence white papers offer no clarification on the conditions under which nuclear weapons would be used on our behalf. Given the known humanitarian, environmental and cultural devastation caused by their use, significant questions remain – including under what circumstances policymakers and defence experts would consider justifying the deployment of nuclear weapons in Australia’s name.

The global trend of nuclear renewal

Anyone watching US President Barack Obama’s speech in Hiroshima in March 2016 might be mistaken for thinking his pledges to end the nuclear weapon threat were sincere. He said:
Among those nations like my own that hold nuclear stockpiles, we must have the courage to escape the logic of fear and pursue a world without them.

This would seem to undermine the utility of nuclear deterrence, but the reality is different.

The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) has claimed the US:

... plans to spend US$348 billion during 2015–24 on maintaining and comprehensively updating its nuclear forces. Some estimates suggest that the USA's nuclear weapon modernisation program may cost up to $1 trillion over the next 30 years.

Despite Trump’s assertion that countries under the US END umbrella should be developing their own nuclear capacity, neither Trump nor his Democratic presidential rival, Hillary Clinton, are likely to discontinue the nuclear renewal programs.

For Australia, the change in the US presidency provides an opportunity to rethink defence relationships, especially those relating to nuclear weapons.

An opportunity to re-evaluate our stance

With some arguing a Trump presidency would undermine alliance relationships, Australia has a chance to strike a new path. The uncomfortable presumption of END in our defence policies is one area we should be actively challenging.

While Australia is a highly militarised middle power in the region, it has few, if any, discernible nuclear threats of its own to counter. It has forsworn such weapons through international law agreements and has at times been a strong voice on efforts to eliminate nuclear weapons.

The revival of concern about the humanitarian impacts of these weapons is shifting old assumptions. Growing impatience with the slow pace of change and continual delays in meeting even the most basic of expectations in relation to nuclear disarmament have meant support for a ban on such weapons has grown internationally to include the majority of UN member countries.

Australia’s reliance on END keeps us on the wrong side of history. And it has led previous governments and the current government to actively oppose the growing calls for a ban on nuclear weapons.

Instead of blindly following US nuclear policies into whatever a future president might envisage, Australia should carefully consider its non-nuclear defence and challenge all claims, surrogate or otherwise, to nuclear weapons.