

Chasing Mirages: Australia and the U.S. Nuclear Umbrella in the Asia-Pacific

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Senior Australian officials worked from 1944 to around 1973, when Australia ratified the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, to equip their country with a nuclear weapons capability. When Australia did choose to permanently forego the nuclear option, it wasn't because of the U.S. nuclear umbrella, but rather because of significant geo-political changes taking place throughout Asia in the mid-1970s. A newly unearthed Australian government document from 1974 describes how a reversal in these trends at some point in the future could lead Australia to consider reversing its long-standing policy of nuclear abstinence, even in the presence of an American nuclear security guarantee.

INTRODUCTION:

From 1944 to around 1973, senior Australian officials made consistent and serious efforts to equip Australia with nuclear weapons capability. This ambition was driven by the desire to contribute to defending British interests in Asia, fears of invasion by China, Indonesia, and Japan, and great power war, as well as the belief that nuclear weapons were merely bigger and better conventional weapons, and that they would proliferate.¹ Concomitantly, Australian policymakers tried to reassure themselves in part by seeking information on U.S. nuclear war plans in Asia, but with little success.

For a number of reasons, the nuclear option was eventually abandoned, and Prime Minister Gough Whitlam ratified the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1973. However, Canberra's decision to instead "rely" on the U.S. nuclear umbrella was, to a large extent, the result of geopolitical changes in Australia's environment rather than specific security assurances given by Washington. At the same time, Australian policy-makers continued to view nuclear weapons and U.S. extended nuclear deterrence as integral to Australian security from the 1970s through the end of the Cold

War. For example, the 1994 Defence White Paper (one of the first White Papers after the collapse of the Soviet Union) stated that:

The use of nuclear weapons remains possible...although it is hard to envisage the circumstances in which Australia could be threatened by nuclear weapons, we cannot rule out that possibility. We will continue to rely on the extended deterrence of the U.S. nuclear capability to deter any nuclear threat or attack on Australia.²

However, new archival findings reveal that even after Australia had ratified the NPT, the view of Australia's defense establishment was that the nation could not rely solely upon American nuclear assurances to inoculate Australia against a nuclear attack. A newly unearthed 1974 Australian Strategic Basis paper and other sources reveal that Australia's commitment to nuclear abstinence has to a large extent been a function of a relatively benign security environment, not American security assurances.

These new archival findings could hold important insights for U.S.-Australian relations in the present and future as the United States pivots toward Asia while simultaneously decreasing the size of its nuclear arsenal.

Regional Security, the Global Nuclear Order and Australia's 1974 Strategic Basis Paper

For many decades it has been assumed by some that Australia's decision to ratify of the NPT stemmed from a belief in the strength and credibility of the American nuclear umbrella.³ However, Australia's public commitment to nuclear abstinence was largely a function of radical strategic changes that had made the Asia-Pacific a much more peaceful place.

For example, the pro-communist Indonesian President Sukarno was ousted in a coup in 1965, and in 1972 Prime Minister Whitlam normalized relations with China. A level of strategic stability was developing in Asia as a result of an uncontested American presence, and the likelihood of major and limited war declined dramatically. At the same time, a new recognizable nuclear order was emerging in which there was a growing norm against the possession of nuclear weapons. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty had been open for signature from 1968. Yet, despite Australia's increasingly benign security environment from the early 1970s onward, and its acceptance of the NPT, nuclear weapons would continue to play an important role in Australia's thinking about its security in acute crises.

The most compelling example of this is a recently uncovered Strategic Basis paper from 1974 that was supposed to have been destroyed. It concluded that because of its unique and isolated geographic location, in

certain crises Australia could not rely on the United States to deter a nuclear attack on the country, and might seek to obtain its own arsenal of American-supplied strategic weapons.

Strategic Basis papers were guidance documents prepared by the Australian defense establishment. The 1974 Strategic Basis paper drew upon contributions from the Joint Intelligence Organisation, the Acting Chief of Defence Staff, and was drafted by a first assistant secretary at the Department of Defence. It was endorsed by the most powerful public servant in Australian history, then Secretary of Defence Sir Arthur Tange. When it was presented to Prime Minister Gough Whitlam and his cabinet, however, they rejected the assessment and ordered that the document be shredded.

While not accepted by the Whitlam government, the ideas contained in the 1974 Strategic Basis Paper were strongly reflective of the reasons for Australia's historically strong interest in an independent nuclear capability, namely that Australia could not rely on the United States for protection against attack in the face of nuclear threats that were focused upon Australia. It stated:

[Where] a major power's nuclear weapons had become the source of threat to Australia the option would be open to the U.S., in particular, to provide Australia with a nuclear capability of a kind which might be adequate

for deterrence. But we certainly cannot assume that it would.⁴

No substantial threat of attack on Australia by a major power would be likely to occur unless that power possessed a nuclear capability; and unless it assessed that there was a negligible risk of Australia being defended by another nuclear-armed power. *It follows that were nuclear powers evidently unwilling to become involved in the defence of Australia, a non-nuclear Australia would be subject to nuclear blackmail... The nuclear threat involved could be applied at inter-continental range and could be countered by no conventional process. We conclude that a necessary condition for any defence of Australia against a major power would be the possession by Australia of a certain minimum credibility of strategic nuclear capability...* Whether it would be necessary for Australia also to possess a tactical nuclear capability is a matter on which definitive judgment could be given only in light of detailed analysis... We conclude (provisionally) that Australia should avoid a nuclear capability other than could and would be employed in a strategic mode and that the existence of that capability should be exploited to deter the use of tactical nuclear weapons against Australian forces or Australian territory.⁵ [Emphasis added]

This view was held by a significant number of senior officials in the Australian

Department of Defence, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the military, and the Australian Atomic Energy Agency well into the early 1970s. Indeed, far more important to Australian strategic thinking than direct U.S. security assurances, or bilateral dialogue on the technical details of those assurances, has been the global order shaped in part by the existence of America's nuclear arsenal. Indeed, the plausible nuclear threats to Australia originated from the nature of the superpower rivalry: there were no existential threats to Australia that did not also threaten the continental United States. Therefore, the U.S. nuclear umbrella did not need to be fashioned to deter threats that would be unique and specific to Australia.

As such, during the Cold War, Australia viewed the probability of a Soviet nuclear attack outside of general nuclear war between the superpowers as remote.⁶ Therefore, maintaining strategic stability between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, by supporting America's strategic forces, was of paramount priority. It was to Australia's benefit that this support involved the placement of key pieces of American strategic infrastructure on Australian soil, whose destruction could act as a trip-wire in case of war that would automatically involve the U.S. in the event of a nuclear attack on Australia. Thus, Australia hosted U.S. intelligence and early warning facilities at Pine Gap and Nurrungar in order to strengthen the American deterrent, even as this increased the likelihood of Soviet nuclear attack on Australia should deterrence fail.⁷ It was not therefore a

reliance on extended nuclear deterrence (END) that caused Canberra to support America's nuclear posture; any nuclear war between the superpowers would make END redundant as the United States employed nuclear weapons in its own defense rather than Australia's.

Australian Attitudes Towards Nuclear Weapons after the Cold War

The authors of the recently unearthed 1974 Strategic Basis paper highlighted some durable elements of Australian thinking on nuclear weapons which are animated by Australia's remoteness from nuclear armed allies and adversaries alike.

The end of the Cold War did not fundamentally change Australian attitudes towards nuclear weapons and the U.S. nuclear umbrella chiefly because of its seemingly limited relevance to Australia's regional environment. There was little indication that new Australia-specific threats would arise that would compromise the indivisibility of the nuclear alliance. Policymakers in Canberra continued to attach a special importance to the so-called American nuclear umbrella, but that "reliance" on such a security guarantee (albeit vague, distant, and multi-layered), is premised on the absence of a major threat specific and unique to Australia.

Today, countries such as Japan and South Korea are increasing their reliance on America's nuclear umbrella as a centrepiece of their national security in response to China's continued economic and military

rise.⁸ Australia, by contrast, has remained comparatively quiet on its expectations regarding American nuclear deterrence guarantees, despite harbouring its own concerns for how China's rise is re-shaping the strategic balance in the Asia-Pacific. Australia's 2009 Defence White Paper mentions the nuclear umbrella only once throughout the whole 138 page document. It says that it provides a "stable and reliable sense of assurance" without explaining how, or in what circumstances America's nuclear umbrella is to be relied upon.⁹

Conventional wisdom suggests that since Australia does not face the same kind of relatively short-range nuclear threat as American allies situated elsewhere, it does not require the same kind of strategic reassurance. It follows then that if Australia perceived enhanced nuclear dangers, its reliance on America's nuclear umbrella would likewise increase. So accepted is this assumption that few in either Canberra or Washington have publicly sought to clarify the operational aspects America's nuclear commitment to Australia any time in the past thirty years, despite the regional strategic environment having shifted dramatically since the mid-1980s.

Yet the status-quo will prevail only so long as Canberra believes that the strategic risks of remaining a non-nuclear armed state are low. Should competition between the U.S. and China intensify, Australia's desire for nuclear assurances may grow, yet it is possible that a program of technical exchanges, exercises and consultations, modelled on NATO's High Level Group

(HLG) for nuclear planning would come up short. Even robust and open dialogue on the operational details of the nuclear umbrella cannot change the geographic and strategic facts of Australia's location in the world.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 For a more updated published history of Australian thinking about nuclear weapons strategy, see Christine Leah, "U.S. Extended Nuclear Deterrence and Nuclear Order: An Australian Perspective,"

- Asian Security*, Vol.8, No.2, pp.1-22 (2012). For a comprehensive review of the history of efforts, assessments, bureaucratic processes and debates on the nuclear option in Australia, see Jim Walsh, "Surprise Down Under: The Secret History of Australia's Nuclear Ambitions," *The Nonproliferation Review* Fall (1997); Richard Broinowski, *Fact or Fission?: The Truth About Australia's Nuclear Ambitions* (Scribe Publications, Melbourne, 2003); Wayne Reynolds, *Australia's Bid for the Atomic Bomb* (Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2000); Wayne Reynolds, "Rethinking the Joint Project: Australia's Bid for Nuclear Weapons, 1945-1960," *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 41, No.3 (1998).
- 2 Department of Defence, *Defending Australia: Defence White Paper 1994* (Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1994), p.96.
 - 3 See for example, "Australia" in *Preventing Nuclear Dangers in Southeast Asia and Australasia*" (International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, 2009).
 - 4 1974 Strategic Basis paper, pp.65-66.
 - 5 1974 Strategic Basis, pp.64-67.
 - 6 A 1981 report concluded that was that an attack on Australia (including nuclear attack) was most likely to occur "only in circumstances of a major conflict between the United States and U.S.S.R which would be preceded by a period of increasing tension and, possibly, a period of conventional warfare. Joint Parliamentary Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, *Threats to Australia's Security, Their Nature and Probability*, (Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1981), p.34.
 - 7 Richard Tanter, "Just in Case": Extended Nuclear Deterrence in the Defense of Australia' (2011) *Pacific Focus* 26(1), 128-130. The Joint Defence Facility at Nurrungar was established in 1969. North West Cape was originally a communications station established for communicating with American FBM submarines operating in the Western Pacific. Into the late 1980s Pine Gap continued as a satellite ground control station, controlling American geostationary SIGINT satellites designed to monitor signals emanating from the Soviet Union. Their collection and analysis was a primary means of verifying that the Soviet Union was complying with arms control agreements. Nurrungar was the location for a satellite ground station controlling DSP satellites stationed over the eastern hemisphere to provide early warning of Soviet ballistic missile launches and to monitor nuclear detonations.
 - 8 The emphasis Tokyo has placed on extended nuclear deterrence has, in recent times, greatly intensified. See Andrew O'Neill, "Extended nuclear deterrence in East Asia: redundant or resurgent?" *International Affairs*, Vol.87, No.6 (2011), pp.1437-1457, 1451.
 - 9 Australian Department of Defence, 'Defence White Paper 2009' (2009) 50, <http://www.defence.gov.au/whitepaper/docs/defence_white_paper_2009.pdf>.

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