

Australian report canvasses nuclear weapons option

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30 December 2009

An Australian government-funded military policy think tank issued a report this month advocating a policy shift to re-open the option of building a nuclear arsenal under conditions where US power is waning and “great-power relationships are shifting”.

While the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) report does not openly call for the acquisition of nuclear weapons, it urges the Rudd Labor government to adopt a “hedging” policy to enable the development of a nuclear war capacity if the security situation deteriorates.

Although the report is cautiously worded, it marks the first semi-official discussion on a topic that has been virtually taboo since the early 1970s, when Canberra ratified the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

ASPI’s report emphasises that it does not express or reflect the views of the Australian government. Nevertheless, its publication indicates that top-level figures in the military and intelligence establishment are seeking to open up a discussion with a view to placing the nuclear option back on the table.

The report’s title—*A delicate issue: Asia’s nuclear future*—indicates the sensitivities involved, both internationally and domestically. Any move by Australia—a mid-level imperialist power that relies explicitly on US nuclear weaponry as a “deterrent” protective shield—to develop a nuclear stockpile would set off alarm bells throughout the Asia-Pacific region, including in China.

At home, there has been deep resistance to any preparations for nuclear war since the 1970s, when growing opposition to French nuclear testing in the Pacific Ocean and to uranium mining led to limits on the opening of new uranium mines. In the report’s introduction, ASPI executive director Peter Abigail declared “some readers may feel challenged by the issues” addressed, but ASPI wanted to “encourage a richer public debate”.

Significantly, the report recalls that the previous Howard government “once canvassed the option of Australia enriching its own uranium” but those ideas “weren’t translated into policy”. In 2006, Howard commissioned a report into the building of nuclear power reactors, under the guise of exploring means to reduce

carbon emissions. However, he was forced by a hostile public reaction to back away from the proposal before the 2007 election. The ASPI report makes clear that one of the unstated considerations behind the proposal would be to acquire the nuclear infrastructure required to build nuclear weapons.

With considerable frankness, the report expresses fears that the “credibility of US nuclear deterrence” is eroding, opening up a Pandora’s Box in which US allies, notably Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, could rapidly construct nuclear weapons and ballistic missile delivery systems.

According to the report, “the region is experiencing a transformation in geopolitics, as Asian powers emerge from a long era of weakness”. The shifting “tectonic plates of regional security” are likely to increase “pressures for nuclear proliferation”.

ASPI recites the alleged dangers of nuclear proliferation by Iran and North Korea, and adds Burma to the list. It also voices fears that “non-state actors” could acquire nuclear weapons, including through the unravelling of political authority in nuclear-armed Pakistan. It even refers to Israel as “one opaque proliferator,” warning that more could emerge in the future.

Above all, ASPI focuses on the implications of the “ebbing away” of US power. The report highlights the fact that South Korean President Lee Myung-bak visited Washington in June, where he sought, and received, from US President Barack Obama an explicit White House assurance that US nuclear weapons provided an “umbrella” for South Korea.

The report then states: “If the credibility of that assurance weakens—and it must, as US strategic primacy becomes more contested in Asia—there’s some prospect that Japan, South Korea and Taiwan might cross the nuclear threshold. All three have previously done some work on nuclear weapons, and ... could proliferate with relative ease.”

The report identifies a “marked quickening” of the nuclear debate throughout the region. “Japanese strategic analysts are starting to ask themselves whether Japan can live without the bomb” and a South Korean daily newspaper, the *Chosun Ilbo*, had

called for the country to develop its own nuclear deterrent. The report asserts that both countries are pursuing space programs as “a legitimate way” to work on key technologies relevant to ballistic missiles.

Like the Rudd government’s 2009 Defence White Paper, the report does not explicitly nominate China as a security threat, no doubt reflecting concerns about an adverse reaction in Australia’s most important export market. Nevertheless, ASPI nominates China as “the fastest rising Asian great power” and postulates that one scenario of “Asian nuclear disorder” could be “the return of a revisionist great power to the Asian security environment”. The report cites the last such emergence—Japan’s rise before World War II—thereby implicitly identifying China as a similar threat.

Further, ASPI notes that China is carrying out an extensive nuclear modernisation program, involving mobile intercontinental ballistic missiles and nuclear-armed submarines. These measures would create “survivable platforms” that could “threaten more significant damage” to US targets during a protracted conflict.

Without doing so overtly, ASPI points to a stark contradiction in the Rudd government’s official policy of global nuclear disarmament, while clinging to the military protection of the US. The Australian military and political establishment has relied upon the backing of the US since World War II in order to exercise its own strategic and commercial power across the region.

Ironically, the ASPI report was published just days before Prime Minister Kevin Rudd visited Tokyo to release, with his Japanese counterpart, Yukio Hatoyama, a jointly commissioned report calling for the US and Russia to reduce their combined stockpile of 22,000 nuclear warheads to 1,000 over the next 15 years, to generate a “new international consensus for nuclear disarmament”.

The ASPI report gives short shrift to that prospect, pointing out that neither nuclear power has an interest in reducing warhead numbers “so low that they might tempt other nuclear-weapon states into a concentrated effort to match US and Russian levels”.

ASPI raises pointed questions about the 2009 Defence White Paper, saying it signalled a determination to retain Australian “strategic weight” in Asia, but avoided the issue of how to retain that superiority if the US nuclear deterrence were to lose its potency and a “revisionist great power” returned.

The White Paper declared that Australia’s ability to “rely on the nuclear forces of the United States to deter nuclear attack on Australia” had “removed the need for Australia to consider more significant and expensive defence options”. It also emphasised Australia’s close integration into the US nuclear network by hosting “some of the United States’ most sensitive and critical strategic capabilities,” particularly at the Pine Gap base near Alice Springs.

ASPI’s report urges the Rudd government to consider “nuclear

hedging”—a halfway house towards the active pursuit of nuclear weapons. That would require developing nuclear expertise, a nuclear industry, proficiency in uranium enrichment and fuel rod reprocessing, and ballistic missile delivery systems. The report complains that despite holding about 40 percent of the world’s low-cost uranium reserves, Australia lacks almost every attribute of such a strategy, unlike Japan, South Korea and Taiwan.

ASPI suggests that in the event of “a darker Asian future of rising nuclear disorder,” Australia might want to reconsider “the choice it made about its nuclear identity” in the late 1960s. If the nuclear path were chosen, the report advises that an arsenal of a “few dozen warheads” would suffice for minimal regional deterrence.

Until the end of the 1960s, key sections of the Australian ruling elite sought to develop nuclear weapons. Between 1952 and 1963, the Menzies government hosted British nuclear testing at the offshore Monte Bello Islands, Emu Field and Maralinga, with the latter, in central Australia, developed as a joint facility. During the 1950s, the Menzies government also participated in the development of the Blue Streak missile, a medium-range ballistic missile intended for delivery of a nuclear warhead. A nuclear research reactor began operating at Lucas Heights, Sydney, in 1958, providing a base for acquiring nuclear expertise.

Cabinet papers, since released, record that in 1968, Liberal-National coalition Prime Minister John Gorton strongly resisted ratifying the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and raised doubts with US Secretary of State Dean Rusk about the reliability of US protection. A cabinet submission proposed a \$150 million bomb-making program. In the end, Australia insisted that it would not ratify the NPT unless the treaty allowed the deployment of US nuclear weapons on Australian soil. After a fractious five-year debate within ruling circles, Gorton’s successor, Billy McMahon, ratified the NPT in 1973, in return for an understanding that the US nuclear umbrella applied to Australia.

Twenty years ago, governments and media around the world claimed that the dismantling of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War between the US and Soviet Russia would usher in global peace and prosperity. Nuclear disarmament was held out as a real possibility, freeing humanity from the threat of annihilation. The ASPI report is another sign that, on the contrary, rising tensions and conflicts between the major world powers, combined with waning US hegemony, are only heightening the dangers of nuclear war.



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