

Renewed push for Australia to build nuclear weapons

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A discussion has begun over the past month in Australian strategic and military circles about the necessity of building nuclear weapons, or developing the capacity to do so, against the alleged threat posed by nuclear-armed powers, above all China.

The debate, in public at least, is quite cautious, given the widespread popular hostility to war and thus the potential for protests to erupt against any move to create a nuclear arsenal. However, the very fact that the issue is actively being discussed is another sign of rapidly sharpening geo-political tensions and the accelerating arms race by major powers around the world.

The renewed push for nuclear arms is connected to a wider strategic debate about the growing danger of conflict between the US and China. For the most part, the Turnbull government and opposition parties, as well as the media and think tanks, have lined up behind the Trump administration's bellicose stance toward China, along with North Korea. The government has backed the new US defence strategy that identifies China and Russia, not terrorism, as the over-riding threat.

Under conditions of the mounting danger of war, however, doubts have been expressed about the willingness and capacity of the United States to come to the aid of Australia, including in the event of a nuclear attack.

Hugh White, who previously advocated encouraging the US to cut a deal with China to ease tensions, wrote an extensive article in the *Quarterly Essay* entitled "Without America: Australia in the New Asia." He argued that in the not too distant future the US will not be able to match China militarily and Australia will have to go it alone.

White, a professor of strategic studies at the Australian National University (ANU), bluntly

declared: "The chilling logic of strategy therefore suggests that only a nuclear force of our own, able credibly to threaten an adversary with major damage, would ensure that we could deter such a threat [from China] ourselves." Having raised the issue, however, he qualified the remark, writing that he was neither "predicting nor advocating that Australia should acquire nuclear weapons."

Paul Dibb, an emeritus professor of strategic studies at the ANU, made a similar suggestion obliquely in an article in the *Australian* last October, entitled "Our nuclear armament position is worth reviewing." Dibb said Australia did not require nuclear weapons at present, but times were changing and "it would be prudent to revisit reducing the technological lead time."

Australia currently has no commercial power reactors and only one research establishment, at Lucas Heights in Sydney run by the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation (ANSTO). On paper, this facility is devoted to the peaceful use of nuclear technology. As a result, the infrastructure to obtain the basic ingredient for a nuclear weapon—enriched uranium or plutonium—is lacking and would take years to build.

What Dibb suggested is that Australia, under the guise of generating nuclear power or on another pretext, acquire the essential technology to produce the fissile material needed to build a nuclear weapon. The hypocrisy involved is staggering. Analysts making such proposals accuse countries like Iran and North Korea of putting such plans into practice, and support a US pre-emptive attack to eliminate the supposed threat.

Dibb is well aware that Australia is a signatory to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT). He noted that it would be difficult to argue under its "supreme interests" clause that Australia is facing an existential

threat. Any move by Australia to “reduce the lead time” also could “seriously concern the US and other countries ... and might stimulate further nuclear proliferation.”

In fact, before signing the NPT in 1970 and ratifying it in 1973, the Australian government drew up plans for a commercial nuclear power plant at Jervis Bay, south of Sydney, that would covertly supply the enriched uranium needed to manufacture nuclear weapons. The Jervis Bay project, which was promoted by Prime Minister John Gorton, was mothballed after he was ousted in 1971 by Billy McMahon.

Associate Professor Wayne Reynolds, author of the book *Australia's Bid for the Atomic Bomb*, told the *Australian* last year in that period “Germany, Italy, the Netherlands—all wanted nuclear weapons but Australia was top of the list because of our uranium resources, our scientists and our enrichment program.”

While White and Dibb, who both held senior positions in the Australian defence and intelligence establishment, are chary about openly pushing for nuclear weapons, others are calling for the matter to be discussed and for steps to be taken.

In an article entitled “Wrestling a nuclear-armed 800-pound gorilla” on December 9, Andrew Davies, director of the defence and strategy program at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), chided White and Dibb for their “coyness and willingness to defer grappling with the logical conclusion of their arguments.”

Davies wrote: “The key question, which we shouldn’t dance around, is whether we judge the risk of an attack from China to be high enough and serious enough to warrant developing an independent nuclear deterrent.” While not answering the question, he declared that “there is a serious strategy discussion to be had.” ASPI receives funds from the government and armaments companies.

Fellow ASPI analyst Malcolm Davis, in an article “Going nuclear?” on January 9, added a note of urgency: “To deter nuclear threats requires nuclear weapons, and having such a capability would reinforce any future non-nuclear deterrent ... Australia would not consider such a step lightly, but don’t expect much time for deep consideration if our policy makers are forced to confront this option.”

Lowy Institute analyst Peter Layton proposed in an

article on January 17 that Australia consider “sharing nuclear weapons” rather than developing an independent arsenal. He suggested the placement of US nuclear weapons on Australian soil on the same basis as in Germany, Belgium, Holland, Italy and Turkey, or alternatively, cost-sharing with Britain to build its fleet of Dreadnought-class nuclear submarines, armed with Trident nuclear missiles.

This discussion is tied to a broader push to boost military spending in preparation for war. Retired Major-General Jim Molan, soon to be confirmed as a Liberal Party senator, argued in the *Australian* on January 4 that US military capacity had declined markedly. Australia must “address our critical vulnerabilities on fuel security and high-end weapons holdings. Without doing so, we could be reduced to impotence in less than a week. In the medium to longer term, we need more stable security guarantees.”

In its 2016 defence white paper the government already foreshadowed a multi-billion dollar military expansion, lifting the defence budget to at least 2 percent of gross domestic product and purchasing advanced weapons systems. In a related move, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull yesterday announced a vast expansion of military industries in the name of a drive to export arms and become one of the world’s top ten weapons exporters.

None of these steps has anything to do with “defence” or preserving peace. Rather in a world where geo-political tensions are accelerating, Australia is seeking the military means to pursue its own imperialist interests, either in league with the US, as it has done since World War II, or independently if need be. The military and political establishment is coming to the conclusion that in order to do this it needs the ultimate in “high-end weapons”—a nuclear arsenal.



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