

Prominent Australian academic suggests building nuclear weapons

Peter Symonds
11 July 2019

Strategic analyst Hugh White has reignited a debate in media and security circles about building nuclear weapons to defend the country against the alleged threat posed by nuclear-armed powers, particularly China. His recently published book, *How to Defend Australia*, argues that nuclear weapons need to be considered because the United States is in relative decline and can no longer be relied upon to defend Australia in a “more contested and more dangerous” region.

This discussion is taking place in the context of a broader dispute in the political establishment over how to position Australian capitalism amid the increasingly belligerent US confrontation with China over economic issues and the US military build-up in the Indo-Pacific in preparation for war.

The dominant position in ruling circles is that Australia has no choice but to stick with the US military alliance, even if it damages relations with its top trading partner, China. Indeed, since US President Barack Obama announced his aggressive “pivot to Asia” against China in the Australian parliament in 2011, Australian military and military bases have been integrated ever more closely with the US, and governments—Labor and Coalition—have toed the line from Washington.

White, a former senior defence official, Labor government adviser and now professor of strategic studies at the Australian National University, is one of the dissident voices. He has previously advocated for the US to strike a power-sharing deal with China to defuse tensions, but now suggests that Australia has to be prepared to go it alone. Amid the rising dangers of a US-China war, White lines up with others who, either directly or indirectly, advocate for a more “independent” foreign policy.

White makes clear that the necessary corollary of a so-called independent foreign policy is a huge build-up in the Australian military. He calls for a virtual doubling of military spending—from 2 percent to 3.5 percent of gross domestic product. Such an increase would be extracted from the working class via the further gutting of essential social services.

White’s argument—in public at least—is based on the hoary old lie that the military build-up is purely defensive in character. In reality, the military’s mission has always been to prosecute the economic and strategic interests of Australian imperialism, which, in more recent times, has included interventions in East Timor and Solomon Islands. Australian participation in British and US-led wars has always sought to secure the backing of the major powers for its own regional and international interests. Now, White is arguing, Australia requires more military muscle to do the same.

White claims he is not advocating the acquisition of nuclear weapons but merely encouraging a debate, which he is now fostering with the assistance of the media. It is not the first time that White has advanced this proposal, but the publication of his book has become the occasion for his appearance on a number of TV and radio programs, including the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s high-profile “Q&A” last Monday night.

Well aware that any decision to build nuclear weapons would face huge public opposition, White was at pains to stress that it was “the hardest issue I’ve ever dealt with in 40 years of thinking about the unpleasant business of war.” White, however, is doing far more than just encouraging a general discussion. He is outlining an entire agenda, including what would be needed to build nuclear weapons and the necessary delivery systems. He advocates creating a nuclear

arsenal along the lines of Britain and France, based on submarine-launched missiles.

For all his attempts to disguise the provocative character of his arguments, White was adamant on the central point, saying: “At the moment, we depend on US nuclear weapons to deter any possible nuclear attack on Australia. The less confident we are of that, the less confident we are that we can rely on America to do that, the stronger the arguments for Australia to acquire its own.” Asked whether China or other powers were a future existential threat, he declared they could pose “at least a very, very serious threat, and one which we can no longer rely on America to defend us from.”

White is standing reality on its head. While it is true that the US faces a historic decline vis-a-vis China and other powers, the response of Obama and now Donald Trump has not been to withdraw from Asia but to confront China on all fronts—diplomatically, economically and militarily—to maintain American domination. US imperialism has no intention of being eclipsed in Asia or any other region of the world and is recklessly engaged in an economic war and military provocations in contested waters close to the Chinese mainland that could trigger open conflict. The danger to Australia’s population is not primarily from Chinese aggression, but from being dragged by the US into a war on China that would have incalculable consequences.

Rising geopolitical tensions and rivalries, and the growing danger of a global conflict, have sparked debate not only in Canberra but in other capitals, including Tokyo, Berlin and Seoul, about building nuclear weapons. A nuclear arms race would multiply many-fold the danger of a nuclear war. This prospect barely rated a mention among the politicians and commentators on the “Q&A” program. Both Liberal Senate President Scott Ryan and Labor foreign affairs spokeswoman Penny Wong differed with the need for nuclear weapons, but did not emphatically rule out building a nuclear arsenal. They praised White, in Wong’s words, for grappling with “the most challenging set of external circumstances since World War II.”

Scant reference was made to the fact that acquiring nuclear weapons would be a clear breach of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty that Australia has signed. Diana Sayed, a human rights lawyer, declared that it

was “astonishing” that the issue was being canvassed. After branding nuclear weapons as “inhumane and indiscriminate” and an environmental disaster, Sayed said: “The fact that Australia would even be entertaining this thought is unfathomable and unconscionable to me, and it goes against everything in international law.” Her remarks were quickly brushed aside.

The growing prominence being afforded in the media to building nuclear weapons is a sure sign that behind the scenes a more intense discussion is underway. This would concern not only the advisability of a nuclear arsenal, but also how to overcome the intense public opposition and anti-war sentiment that such a decision would trigger. The debate is another warning of the advanced preparations being made in capitals around the world for war, not decades down the track, but in the not-too-distant future.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact