

Australia: Opposition's nuclear power plans open the door for nuclear weapons

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19 July 2024

Federal opposition leader Peter Dutton's announcement last month that the Liberal-National Coalition would build seven nuclear power plants seeks to overturn longstanding official opposition to nuclear energy, entrenched in state and federal law. Currently, Australia has just one nuclear reactor, operated by the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation (ANSTO) for research and the production of medical isotopes.

Dutton slammed Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's Labor government for its reliance on renewables, claiming that nuclear power would provide cheap, reliable, environmentally-friendly energy for households and businesses. He dismissed problematic issues of nuclear waste and safety by pointing out that the Albanese government had already ditched Labor's nuclear-free policy by embracing the acquisition of nuclear-powered attack submarines under the AUKUS pact with the UK and US.

In the ensuing wave of commentary on the nuclear power proposal, critics derided Dutton's lack of detail, including costings, and pointed out that nuclear reactors would not be operational for at least a decade. Advocates of the profitable renewable industries touted solar and wind power as the cheap, clean, safe alternatives to nuclear power.

Barely mentioned is the potential of a nuclear power industry to provide a pathway for the development of nuclear weapons: first, by providing a large pool of nuclear scientists, engineers and technicians and, second, by creating the means to manufacture the fissionable material needed for a bomb. The latter would require further heavy investment in either a uranium enrichment plant or a plutonium reprocessing plant, or both.

Such a discussion has been underway largely behind closed doors in strategic and military circles for decades. Plans for an Australian atomic bomb were seriously considered in the 1950s and 1960s, with the 1968-71 Coalition government of Prime Minister John Gorton taking the first steps in building a nuclear power reactor that provided a route to manufacturing a nuclear weapon.

In the midst of the Cold War, however, Washington was determined to maintain the effective monopoly of its massive nuclear arsenal and thus its use as a menacing threat or in war itself against the Soviet Union or any other potential rival. Under the guise of disarmament, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) banned the manufacture of nuclear weapons except for the five countries with a known nuclear arsenal—the US, the Soviet Union, Britain, France and China—and effectively stymied the

Australian project as well as most similar plans by other countries. Australia signed the NPT in 1971 and ratified it in 1973.

The global geopolitical landscape, however, has dramatically changed since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the end of the Cold War. Far from bringing global peace and prosperity, US imperialism has been waging war for the past three decades in a desperate attempt to maintain its global hegemony. Conflicts in the Middle East and Central Asia are now rapidly metastasizing into great power conflicts and world war involving nuclear-armed powers. The US and its NATO allies are already waging war against Russia in Ukraine and, in league with its Asian allies, including Australia, preparing for war against China.

In this context, as the danger of nuclear war looms larger, debate has reemerged in military circles over the building of an Australian atomic bomb. In his book *How to Defend Australia*, published in 2019, prominent strategic analyst Hugh White devoted an entire chapter to the question: "Does Australia need its own nuclear weapons to preserve its strategic independence in the decades ahead?"

The way White posed the question points to the central argument of the book as a whole—the necessity of Australian imperialism forging a foreign and military policy that does not rely on America's waning power. He argued that a US pullback from Asia in the face of a more aggressive China would potentially leave Australia isolated, particularly without the protection of the so-called American nuclear umbrella.

White, however, is standing reality on its head. The response of US imperialism to its historic decline has not been to retreat into isolation but rather to aggressively use its military might in one war after another. In the Indo-Pacific, the US has been preparing for war with China, which Washington regards as the chief threat to its global domination. Far from leaving Australia isolated, the US is integrating the Australian military directly into its war plans against China—the AUKUS pact being the most obvious expression. This places the Australian population on the front lines of such a war.

White speaks for a minority in the ruling class that doubts the wisdom of being drawn into a catastrophic military conflict with Australia's biggest trade partner. He and others argue for Australian imperialism to adopt a stance of heavily-armed neutrality. While not explicitly calling for an Australian nuclear weapon, White's book certainly implied its necessity. Grossly inflating the threat posed by China, he argued that without the

protection of the US, the only realistic means of countering such a threat is for Australia to have its own nuclear armaments.

In a particularly ghoulish passage, White considered the minimum nuclear arsenal necessary to present a credible deterrent to China. Couched in terms of defence, his estimate was based on a British report from the late 1970s, during the Cold War, which calculated the level of damage that its nuclear forces needed to be able to inflict on the Soviet Union to deter Moscow from launching a strike.

The report concluded, White wrote, that the British military had to be able to “either completely destroy government centres in Moscow (and presumably Moscow itself), or inflict ‘breakdown level’ damage on Moscow, Leningrad and two other cities, or lesser levels of damage on up to 30 other targets, including large cities. It estimated that inflicting this level of punishment carried ‘the possibility that up to 5 million people might be killed and a further 4 million injured.’”

Given the far larger population of China, White implied that the level of destruction would need to be far greater. For the Australian military, he wrote, “an effective minimum deterrent force would have to be able to unleash several dozen warheads on an adversary’s cities, so it is not a merely token force.”

White’s book revived the foreign policy and military establishment debate over the necessity of an Australian nuclear arsenal. While no one is overtly calling for Australia to establish its own nuclear arms stockpile, there are certainly those who advocate creating the preconditions for doing so at short notice through the creation of a nuclear power industry.

In October 2019, Rod Lyon, an Australian Strategic Policy Institute analyst, published an article entitled: “Should Australia build its own nuclear arsenal?” He answered his own question with a heavily qualified: “Yes, if it needs to.” He bemoaned the fact that the country lacked a nuclear-skilled workforce, as well as the capacity to produce fissionable materials needed to make a nuclear weapon. “If Australia was to attempt to proliferate, using only national resources, we’d likely face a 15-year-plus haul.”

Lyon concluded that the global situation was sufficiently dark to be thinking about an indigenous nuclear weapons program and the need to “be acting to minimise the lead time required for us to have such a capability, just in case we decide we do need it.”

While Lyon did not explain how the lead time could be shortened, Associate Professor of Physics Heiko Timmers at the University of New South Wales, an opponent of nuclear weapons, inadvertently did. Writing in the *Conversation* in July 2019, he pointed out that Australia had no way to build nuclear weapons, even if the government wanted to. However, he noted: “A well-developed nuclear power industry would eventually give Australia almost all the necessary technologies, personnel and materials to make and maintain a nuclear weapon. This includes, in particular, the ability to enrich uranium and breed plutonium.”

Five years on, US imperialism is already, in reality, engaged in a war with nuclear-armed Russia in Ukraine and making advanced preparations for conflict with nuclear-armed China. The Australian military, including its bases, forms a vital component of the Pentagon’s strategy for fighting a nuclear war and, thus, a potential nuclear target. American nuclear submarines and nuclear-

capable strategic bombers are being stationed in western and northern Australia. US spy and communications bases in Australia are indispensable to the US military’s global war plans. In other words, if US imperialism launches nuclear war, Australian imperialism is automatically involved.

Moreover, the very fact that AUKUS envisages conventionally-armed Australian submarines operating alongside their US and British nuclear-armed counterparts in any conflict with China must raise the question for the Pentagon—can we afford to sell Virginia-class submarines to Australia that are not going to be nuclear-armed? An obvious question is whether a secret deal has been struck to arm Australian submarines with nuclear weapons in the event of war. The US already has such an arrangement with several NATO allies that have trained aircrews ready to take part in a nuclear attack.

None of these options can be openly discussed. While a decision on nuclear power plants is yet to be made, let alone nuclear weapons, the gruesome calculations undoubtedly being considered in think tanks and by military planners—the catastrophic consequences of a nuclear weapon dropped on Sydney or Canberra, and many millions of more deaths across the globe—would undoubtedly provoke widespread fear and further fuel to anti-war opposition and protests.

While nuclear power stations may prove useful as part of a scientific solution to halt climate change, it is impossible under capitalism to resolve the inherent dangers of nuclear safety and waste disposal, let alone disentangle nuclear power from nuclear weapons and war. The worsening economic crisis of global capitalism fuelling geopolitical rivalries and the rapacious drive for profit only makes the risks more acute. The dangers of nuclear Armageddon, as well as catastrophic climate change, can only be resolved internationally. That requires nothing less than a unified international anti-war movement of the working class based on a socialist perspective to abolish the profit system and its outmoded division of the world into rival nation-states.



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