

# **Absurd, obscene and reckless – American nuclear weapons in the defence of Australia**

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Most Australians are unaware that their government aims to defend their country with genocidal nuclear weapons. For the past two decades every Australian government has claimed to defend Australia against threat of nuclear attack by reliance on nuclear retaliation by the United States. In the words of the [latest Defence White Paper](#)

“As long as nuclear weapons exist, we rely on the nuclear forces of the United States to deter nuclear attack on Australia. Australia is confident in the continuing viability of extended nuclear deterrence under the Alliance, while strongly supporting ongoing efforts towards global nuclear disarmament.”<sup>2</sup>

This long proclaimed policy of reliance on US extended nuclear deterrence in the defence of Australia is absurd, obscene and reckless. Absurd because no plausible nuclear threat to Australia has ever been officially identified (other than that derived from hosting Pine Gap and North West Cape). Obscene because government rhetoric identifies other people’s nuclear weapons as weapons of mass destruction, and yet proposes that nuclear genocide be used on our behalf. Strategically foolish, because despite decades of Australian pleading, the “the continuing viability of extended nuclear deterrence under the Alliance” averred by the 2013 White Paper is literally incredible: the United States [has never made any public statement](#) providing the assurance of nuclear protection successive governments proclaim to exist.<sup>3</sup>

The essence of deterrence in concept is deadly simple: the use of threats by one party to convince another party to refrain from initiating some course of action – in this case, the use of nuclear weapons for intimidation or attack. Extended nuclear deterrence was invented by the US in the 1960s as a policy of providing assurance to its allies in NATO and East Asia that threat of major – and particularly nuclear - attack would be met with a nuclear response – only much later was it applied to Australia.

For deterrence to “work”, two things are required. Firstly, the credibility of the protector’s intent must be established – in the eyes of the country to be deterred, the ally to be protected, and the protector’s domestic audience. This is usually achieved by declarations of policy, symbolic deployments of troops, showing the flag, and so on. Secondly, the reliability of the protector’s capacity to retaliate is essential – an appropriate force structure, strategic doctrine, and political resolve.

Yet, amongst the many troubling qualities to [the Australian model of extended nuclear deterrence](#), the strangest thing is that the government claims to rely an American assurance that has never been given. There has never been any public statement by a US government to the effect that such an assurance has been given to Australia. Former Defence Minister Kim Beazley has written of longstanding Australian attempts to get such an assurance, but none was forthcoming. This is not surprising from an American point of view.<sup>4</sup> The US has repeatedly provided such public assurances to Japan, South Korea and the NATO countries – which faced the Soviet Union in the Cold War, and nuclear armed neighbours subsequently. For the US, that was part of the price of alliance. But Australia has never faced any such threat (the US bases apart) that would provide an incentive to the

US to make such a commitment, and thereby give yet another hostage to fortune, with nothing to gain.

Could there be a secret document providing such assurance? There could be, but well-placed former officials such as Hugh White have never claimed there is, and it is highly doubtful. Could there be a gentleman's agreement amongst US and Australian officials? Certainly White has spoken about *oral* assurances he received from US officials in the lead-up to writing the 2000 Defence White Paper.<sup>5</sup> But the strategic capacity of either secret agreements or a spoken consensus between defence officials to deter a would-be opponent – or to seriously commit the United States to the nuclear defence of Australia – is effectively zero.

The first public statement of the policy is in the 1994 Defence White Paper – five years after the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>6</sup> The Hawke government identified Australia's strategic interest in nuclear matters in terms of supporting US efforts to a global nuclear balance – principally by hosting US bases in Australia said to contribute to US arms control verification capacities. The bases apart, there was no perceived nuclear threat specifically to Australia. But by 1994, the Keating government announced a shift in policy, with an explicit claim to US nuclear protection.

Today, the Defence Department and sympathetic security analysts will rather diffidently mention potential future threats from North Korea and Iran – but understandably without any conviction. In reality, Australian defence thinking, following that of the United States, is now consumed by China. True, if push comes to nuclear shove between China and the US, [Pine Gap remains a lucrative and high priority Chinese target](#).<sup>7</sup> But otherwise there is no plausible nuclear threat from China specific to Australia, and in any case Australian governments remain willing to sell both the quarry and the farm to China.

Occasionally government officials and defenders of extended deterrence suggest that the missing assurance of US nuclear protection is “implicit in ANZUS”.<sup>8</sup> This is simply ridiculous. Not only does [the treaty](#) not refer to anything nuclear, but compared with the US treaties with Japan, South Korea and NATO, its obligation to Australia is limited to a promise to consult. And famously, on the only occasions when Australia has called on the US for assistance under the provisions of ANZUS – against Indonesia in the early 1960s – the primacy of US strategic interest in Indonesia won out over those of its Australian treaty partner.

In fact ambiguity about US nuclear protection is probably the worst of all possible worlds, since it provides false comfort for Australia and an incentive for other countries to accept the legitimacy of nuclear deterrence – and hence the attractiveness of nuclear weapons. In the absence of any conceivable threat, there is a dangerously fanciful quality about Australia's “[just in case](#)” insistence on US nuclear protection.

In recent years, Australian governments have been upping the ante on this issue. Not only is the protection of the US nuclear umbrella reiterated on every relevant occasion, but Australia has gone further to push the United States to stand firm on the matter, lest allies become perforce proliferators. As the [Australian ambassador testified to the US Congress in 2009](#), confidence in US nuclear protection “has assured very close US allies like Australia that they do not need to develop their own nuclear weapons”.<sup>9</sup> This assertion of an allied nuclear proliferation prophylactic function of deterrence is a perverse incentive and a kind of blackmail – one entirely at odds with Australia's usually nominal disarmament agenda on nuclear weapons.

For what strategic rationale would Australia want to join the company of nuclear wannabe pariah states like North Korea, Syria, Libya, Iraq and Israel? Both in terms of extended deterrence and indigenous nuclear weapons, the fundamental questions about Australia and nuclear weapons are as simple as they absent from public discussion: What threat to use nuclear weapons against Australia exists? If such threats can be cited, what level of probability and strategic risk is involved? If there is a significant risk, what non-nuclear alternative responses are possible?

The current and foreseeable answers are clear – there are no plausible threats and no need for defence of Australia by nuclear weapons – whether American or Australian. Yet what is most remarkable about two decades of government proclamation of a willingness to use inherently genocidal American nuclear weapons in the defence of Australians is that there has never been a pretence of a serious policy debate or justification.

Australia should abandon its policy of reliance on claimed US nuclear protection. This does not entail any kind of break with the US alliance as such. For a start, the alliance simply does not provide the claimed protection. More importantly, the US rapprochement in recent years with [New Zealand has proceeded apace](#) without any modification of that country's nuclear-free policy. As David Lange always insisted, a nuclear-free New Zealand may continue to share significant strategic goals with its alliance partner. The US claim that New Zealand's actions threatened the global indivisibility of nuclear deterrence have been abandoned in practice.<sup>10</sup>

Abandoning the fantasy crutch of US extended nuclear deterrence would allow Australia to show genuine leadership on the nuclear issue. It would then be possible to work with Indonesia, the ASEAN countries, New Zealand and the countries of the South Pacific to deepen the commitments of the Southeast Asian and South Pacific nuclear weapon-free zones, presently limited by the reluctance of the five nuclear armed permanent members of the Security Council. As a US ally that has transcended reliance on nuclear deterrence Australia would then be in a position to play a more constructive role in the stalemated nuclear cockpit of Northeast Asia by supporting proposals for the US to replace its extended nuclear deterrence assurances to Japan and South Korea with much more credible promises of extended *conventional* deterrence against North Korea.

It is now time for Australia to take the next step, and to take its commitments to a world free of nuclear weapons seriously, and abandon a policy which is as obscene as it is absurd and dangerous.

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<sup>2</sup> [Defence White Paper 2013](#), Department of Defence, Commonwealth of Australia, para 3.41.

<sup>3</sup> This draws on research and sources reported in Richard Tanter, "[Just in Case': Extended Nuclear Deterrence in the Defense of Australia](#)", *Pacific Focus*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (April 2011), at <http://nautilus.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/2011cjust-in-Case2011d---Pacific-Focus.pdf>. Alternative interpretations and further research are provided by Stephan Frühling, "The fuzzy limits of self-reliance: US extended deterrence and Australian strategic policy", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, (2013): 67:1, 18-34, and Christine M. Leah, US Extended Nuclear Deterrence and Nuclear Order: An Australian Perspective, *Asian Security*, (2012) 8:2, 93-11.

<sup>4</sup> Kim Beazley, "Whither the San Francisco alliance system?" *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 57, No. 2, pp. 325-338, July 2003, p. 329.

<sup>5</sup> Hugh White, Testimony before the Australian Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee of Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade on the issue of U.S. – Australian defence relations, 26 March 2004; and interview with Richard Tanter, 15 November 2012, followed by an exchange of letters, 22 March and 4 April 2013.

<sup>6</sup> [Defending Australia: Defence White Paper 1994](#), Department of Defence, Commonwealth of Australia, 1994, para 9.7.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Tanter, [The "Joint Facilities" revisited – Desmond Ball, democratic debate on security, and the human interest](#), Special Report, Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainability, 12 December 2012, at <http://nautilus.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/The-Joint-Facilities-revisited-1000-8-December-2012-2.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Dibb, Former Deputy Secretary of Defence, Presentation to Seminar on the ANZUS Alliance, Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, Parliament of Australia (11 August 1997).

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<sup>9</sup> [Presentation to the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Policy of the United States, Submission to the United States Nuclear Posture Review 2009, Ministerial Submission, Approved 23 February 2009, Attachment C, A640 11973](#), released under Freedom of Information Request 357/10/11, at [http://www.defence.gov.au/foi/docs/disclosures/357\\_1011\\_Documents.pdf](http://www.defence.gov.au/foi/docs/disclosures/357_1011_Documents.pdf). My thanks to Tim Wright and ICAN Australia.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Tanter, [Standing upright there: the New Zealand path to a nuclear-free world](#), Nautilus Institute, NAPSNet [Policy Forum](#), 3 October 2012, at <http://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/standing-upright-there-the-new-zealand-path-to-a-nuclear-free-world/>.