Australia’s New Nuclear Ambitions

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Contents

1. Introduction
2. Essay - Australia's New Nuclear Ambitions
3. Nautilus invites your response

Introduction

Richard Broinowski, former diplomat and Adjunct Professor at the University of Sydney, argues that "without transparency from government about its plans Australians are left uninformed about what is really going on" concerning the Howard government's thinking about nuclear energy. "But, for speculation, there are a number of indicative straws blowing in the wind", with possibilities including enhanced exports, nuclear waste imports, uranium enrichment, nuclear waste reprocessing, and even nuclear power generation.

Broinowski concludes:

> "Outlandish as it may seem to many Australians, the challenge may soon be to reassure Australia's neighbours, especially Indonesia, that Mr Howard has no plans to build nuclear weapons in Australia."

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Essay - Australia's New Nuclear Ambitions

In 1972, common sense and political impracticalities killed off Australia's early Cold War nuclear weapons ambitions. From then until the end of the last century, Australia's nuclear character became one of sanctimonious caution. In the view of its nuclear officials, the country was a conscientious member of the nuclear non-proliferation regime. It sold uranium, but very selectively, and from only three mines. Apart from the five recognised nuclear weapons states, prospective customer countries had to have impeccable non-weapons credentials, and sign strict undertakings that they wouldn't even think of diverting Australian uranium into weapons programs. Iran, the Philippines and Taiwan were eliminated because of suspect national character, motives and legalities. Nor could customer countries importune Australia to take back spent nuclear fuel from Australian uranium. They had bought it. They could keep it.

Meanwhile, Australian electricity continued to be generated by coal and gas augmented by hydro. No nuclear power reactors, no enrichment or re-processing plants blighted the landscape. Nor did Australian officials consider acquiring or making nuclear weapons. That idea had been abandoned, along with a lot of other Cold War impedimenta, when the ill-fated Jervis Bay nuclear reactor project was postponed by Prime Minister William McMahon in August 1971, then abandoned by his Labor Party successor, Gough Whitlam, in 1972.

Beneath the rectitude, however, was a different reality. Under pressure from uranium mining companies, pro-miners in both Liberal and Labor governments, and some customer countries, the safeguards conditions were eroded. Nuclear power corporations were allowed to enrich and re-process irradiated Australian uranium on a 'programmatic' basis, eliminating case-by-case approval. ' Flag swaps' blurred the capacity to determine ownership of Australian uranium. It could be 'parked', out of the uranium processing mainstream, freeing it from Australian or IAEA controls. By accepting the accounting practice of 'equivalence', Australian uranium could be used in processes not permitted in safeguards agreements - including the making of weapons - provided an equal quantity of fissile material, somewhere and in some form, could be said to be Australian. Some Australian fissile material went missing in international fuel cycle activities, including plutonium.

Despite these erosions, Australian safeguards officials continued to be self-righteous. Australian nuclear materials, they asserted, could neither go missing, nor end up in weapons. And Australian diplomats took prominent roles in pushing international anti-proliferation initiatives such as the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and Missile Technology Control Regime. They supported a decision by the International Court of Justice to make the use of nuclear weapons illegal in all cases except acute national survival.

In 1995, the Labor Prime Minister, Paul Keating, set up the Canberra Commission, designed to kick start a new round of nuclear disarmament. Its distinguished members included a Nobel Peace Prize winner, Joseph Rotblat, commander of US strategic nuclear forces until 1994 General Lee Butler, former US Secretary of Defence and World Bank President Robert McNamara, and former chief of the British Defence staff Field Marshall Lord Carver. The Australian participants were the war historian Robert O'Neill and the nuclear diplomat, Richard Butler. None of these men, observed Keating with satisfaction, had come down in the last shower.

In August 1996, the Commission announced its recommendations. It enjoined China, France, Russia,

the UK and US to make a clear and unequivocal commitment to abolish their nuclear arsenals according to their undertakings under Article VI of the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT). They should begin by taking all their nuclear forces off alert status, remove the warheads from their missiles, initiate a third round of START negotiations, abolish all weapons tests, and conclude a no-first-use agreement.

Paul Keating's government lost the general election of March 1996. Keating later claimed that if he had won, he would have taken the Commission's findings to the United Nations and discussed them with President Clinton and the leaders of other nuclear weapons states. But Australia's new conservative prime minister, John Howard, would do no such thing. He and his foreign minister, Alexander Downer, quietly buried the Commission's findings and it never met again. Downer later described the Commission as a political stunt, a sentiment in keeping with Howard's determination to distance himself from most things Keating had stood for.

Howard was not for the 'big picture', enmeshment with Asia, multilateralism or middle power activism. He would concentrate on 'common sense', 'realistic goals', and a 'hard-headed assessment'. He would re-orientate Australia's national interests and security concerns towards Europe and the United States. Particularly in foreign and defence policies, Howard wanted to accept Washington's big picture as Australia's own, especially when George W. Bush became president of the United States in February 2001.

On nuclear issues Howard began to demonstrate the same kind of disregard for established non-proliferation norms as his American patron. He contributed Australian technology and research towards Bush's National Missile Defence system - a sure-fire way to encourage regional nuclear proliferation. He supported Bush's decision to walk away from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty with Russia. He applauded Bush's Nuclear Posture Review of December 2001 and National Security Strategy of September 2002, which together lowered traditional US barriers to the use of nuclear weapons by sanctioning their deployment against suspected adversaries including non nuclear weapons states. He supported Bush's illegal preventive war-fighting doctrine, or, as Condoleezza Rice called it, 'anticipatory self-defence'. He remained supportive of new US nuclear weapons research, even though it was directly contrary to the spirit and intention of Article VI of the NPT, a treaty that Foreign Affairs officials continued insisting that Australia still supported.

In May 2006, while he was still on a visit to the United States, Mr Howard called for what he characterised as a 'full-blooded debate' on all aspects of nuclear technology as part of a review of Australia's energy resources and their role in global warming. There was no doubt where his own sympathies lay. Australia, he asserted on 17 July 2006, has a massive opportunity to become an energy superpower by selling more uranium on world markets. 'We are part of the nuclear fuel cycle whether we like it or not', he declared. 'The real question is whether Australia should fully consider our interests and responsibilities in the global nuclear energy debate or whether we succumb to a dogma of denial'.

Unsurprisingly, his sentiments strongly echoed those of President Bush, who said at Limerick in Pennsylvania on 26 May that nuclear power was abundant, affordable, clean and safe, that the American power industry must resist over-regulation and aggressively move forward to build more reactors.

Howard appears to favour expanded uranium sales to more and more customer countries from more and more Australian mines, even if they are subject to less and less stringent nuclear safeguards. He also contemplates selling to non-signatories of the NPT such as India and Taiwan.

But what else would Howard like to see as desirable outcomes of his debate? What, apart from

driving an uncomfortable wedge into the opposition Labor Party in the year before general elections, would he like to achieve? Does he want Australia to enrich its uranium before selling it as a vastly more valuable commodity than the unenriched uranium oxide so far exported? Does he link such a move with the strong opportunities to limit further proliferation it presents to lease its uranium fuel and bring back the irradiated material for permanent disposal in Australia? Or does he seek to earn hugely more income from Australia's uranium trade by importing and burying the nuclear wastes of other countries, as former Labor prime minister Bob Hawke recommended in September 2005?

Does Mr Howard want Australian power companies to construct nuclear power reactors of their own? Would government subsidise the huge cost? Would he see reprocessing of spent fuel from such reactors, (as Prime Minister John Gorton planned in 1969), as an opportunity to acquire weapons-grade plutonium for an Australian bomb program? Would he encourage Australian research at Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation (ANSTO) or in Australian universities into weapons-related nuclear technology? Does he or anyone in the Australian defence establishment, want to resurrect plans for Australia to acquire or build its own nuclear weapons?

Informed answers are hard to come by because the federal government refuses to divulge specifically what it knows or wants. Without transparency from government about its plans, Australians are left uninformed about what is really going on. But, for speculation, there are a number of indicative straws blowing in the wind.

First, commercial enrichment of uranium in Australia is a possibility. It was first seriously considered by Gough Whitlam's Minister for Minerals and Energy, R.F.X. Connor, in 1973, but Whitlam's government fell before it could be implemented. Howard has now indicated he thinks it is a good idea. If it goes ahead, it probably won't be by energy-intensive methods such as gaseous diffusion or centrifuge, but by streaming uranium through lasers tuned to a frequency that only 'sees' fissile U-235 isotopes. Cheap, convenient, and available through far smaller (and thus less detectable) plants than are required for enrichment by diffusion or centrifuges, the technology has been researched over ten years at leased facilities at ANSTO's Lucas Heights complex by a 'private' group called Silex (Separation of Isotopes by Laser). According to a company spokesman, Michael Goldsworthy, the technology has been sold to the American nuclear company General Electric. The first commercial plant will be constructed in the US, but others, he says, could follow in Australia.

Second, the government may have plans for an international spent-fuel storage regime in Australia. In August 2005, Canberra announced that a federal permanent storage facility for low, and what it disingenuously calls 'intermediate' level waste (it is in truth high-level), would be constructed at one of three sites on Commonwealth land in the Northern Territory - two just north of Alice Springs, one near Katherine south of Darwin. This has been presented as only for Australian material. But in March 2006, a significant bill passed through federal parliament unremarked by the media. Called the ANSTO Amendment Bill, it allows three new categories of nuclear material, other than waste from Lucas Heights, to be stored. Two of these are unexceptional, but one is Australian nuclear material re-processed abroad that may be mixed with nuclear material from 'other sources'. This would open the door to store the irradiated fuel rods and nuclear wastes of other countries.

Third, three years ago, a new railway line between Alice Springs and Darwin was constructed by the American company Kellogg, Brown and Root - a subsidiary of the Halliburton Corporation. The railway passes conveniently closely to all three putative disposal sites, and would be an ideal way to transport nuclear spent fuel arriving either in Darwin, Port Adelaide, or any eastern Australian seaboard port.

Fourth, nuclear protagonists in government have talked for years about establishing an international reprocessing industry in Australia. This would complement an Australian international spent fuel and

nuclear waste storage regime. It would also open the door to Australia leasing enriched fuel and bringing back the irradiated rods for disposal, a non-proliferation method consistently practised to date only by Russia and its predecessor, the Soviet Union.

Fifth, new areas of nuclear weapons-related activity in Australia other than laser enrichment are possible. The hot commissioning of Australia's new research reactor at Lucas Heights is imminent. Based on an Argentine design, the 20 MW plant, called OPAL (open pool light water reactor) replaces the aging 10 MW HIFAR (high-flux Australian reactor) which began operating in 1958. ANSTO claims OPAL will more efficiently produce radio pharmaceuticals and isotopes than its predecessor, provide better irradiation services and neutron beam research. Also, that it will assist ANSTO advance its research into nuclear sleuthing techniques - how to detect traces of weapons grade uranium or plutonium in the soil at or near nuclear facilities in other countries.

Much of this nuclear technology has dual military and civilian uses - a problem it shares with the whole nuclear fuel chain. ANSTO's mission statement does not exclude weapons research. It includes undertaking research 'that will advance the application of nuclear science and technology', but does not specifically say to what they will be applied.

Associated with this is another fruitful area for speculation: whether Australia will have a role in President Bush's Global Nuclear Energy Partnership (GNEP). Announced by Energy Secretary Samuel Bodman on 6 February 2006, and given further expression by Bush at the St Petersburg G 8 meeting, the grand plan envisions a global nuclear order in which the United States and other fuel supplier nations operate a cradle-to-grave nuclear fuel-leasing program similar to Eisenhower's Atoms for Peace program in the 1950s. Carefully selected supplier nations would enrich and supply fresh fuel to conventional nuclear power plants in return for user nations agreeing to forego enrichment and reprocessing. The spent fuel would be returned to host nations for reprocessing and recovery of plutonium and heavy radioactive metals. The reprocessed material would then be used as mixed oxide fuel (MOX) in fast 'burner' reactors designed to generate electricity while destroying the plutonium through transmutation. This plan is of course contrary to the provisions of the NPT for sharing of peaceful nuclear fuel-cycle technology. This may not be of concern to John Howard.

But Australia is not on Bush's list of nations that would be permitted under the Partnership to enrich uranium. These are restricted to America, Russia, Britain, France, China and Japan, all of which already do so. On 18 July, Howard told Paul Kelly, the Australian's editor-at-large that it was inconceivable that the US would not endorse an Australian enrichment decision. 'We would be seen', he told Kelly, 'as a totally reliable and trustworthy country'. Whether the Partnership works will depend on wide international cooperation. And whether Australia gets invited to join it as a supplier nation of enriched uranium will be a good test of ten years of John Howard's Washington diplomacy.

Meanwhile, a test of Howard's Asian diplomacy will be how his nuclear plans are interpreted in Australia's own region. In December 2002, he upset the leaders of many neighbouring countries by declaring that he was prepared to launch pre-emptive off-shore strikes to stop terrorists threatening Australia. The country's image as an aggressive neighbour was not diminished by military expeditions to East Timor and the Solomons, even though Australian forces were formally invited there. Planned Australian weapons acquisitions have not helped. These include naval and air transports that can move large contingents of ground forces outside Australia to participate anywhere in the global war against terrorism, and long-range air-to-surface cruise missiles for Australia's F-III and F A-18 aircraft. This issue is especially sensitive in Jakarta, where a Foreign Ministry spokesman said in 2004: 'Australia's government has, until now, been against the proliferation of advanced missile technologies in the region. There is a risk that raising the level of sophistication could lead to some kind of counter response'.

Outlandish as it may seem to many Australians, the challenge may soon be to reassure Australia's neighbours, especially Indonesia, that Mr Howard has no plans to build nuclear weapons in Australia, or to arm the Royal Australian Air Force's cruise missiles with them. But developments in Northeast Asia may make such an eventuality less outlandish. There is a high risk, even a probability, that if North Korea expands its inchoate nuclear weapons capability Japan, South Korea and Taiwan would quickly develop their own. This would put pressure on Australia to reconsider its nuclear options. Certainly, one way Howard could square the GNEP circle would be to walk away from the NPT and for Australia to become a nuclear weapons state itself.

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Richard's previous APSNet policy forum was " Australian nuclear weapons: the story so far", 17 July 2006.

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Nautilus invites your response

The Austral Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to the editor, Jane Mullett: austral@rmit.edu.au. Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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