

A reply to Richard Tanter

Recommended Citation

"A reply to Richard Tanter", APSNet Policy Forum, November 12, 2007,
<https://nautilus.org/apsnet/a-reply-to-richard-tanter/>

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Introduction

Martine Letts of the Lowy Institute for International Policy writes that "Richard Tanter appears to have carefully deconstructed [my contribution](#) to the Lowy Institute's Voters' Guide and put it back together again through the rather artificial conceit of a 'realist' approach to international relations, which leads to some wrong conclusions about what my article really means." Letts argues that "a future government should consider the 'what if' questions too - what if we live in a region with not just one, but two and maybe three nuclear-armed states. I for one hope that the very prospect of Australia needing to revisit its decision not to consider a nuclear deterrent would be sufficient to encourage us to work harder to shore up and strengthen the existing global nuclear governance arrangements and not to further undermine them. This involves more than pious slogans and adherence to old ways of doing things. To conclude that the logical consequence of this line of argument is to advocate for an Australian nuclear weapon is about as credible as the search for those elusive weapons of mass destruction in Iraq."

Essay: A reply to Richard Tanter

In '[The re-emergence of an Australian nuclear weapons option?](#)', Richard Tanter appears to have carefully deconstructed [my contribution](#) to the Lowy Institute's Voters' Guide and put it back together again through the rather artificial conceit of a 'realist' approach to international relations, which leads to some wrong conclusions about what my article really means.

He states that my brief is directed at an incoming Rudd administration. Not so. The Voters' Guide is intended to highlight some of the approaching policy challenges for whoever wins on 24 November. In light of the polls, Richard Tanter may be right in thinking that a future Australian government will be led by Kevin Rudd. Our Voters' Guide makes no such assumption and neither do I.

The Voters' Guide states that the geostrategic, energy and nuclear environments have changed significantly since the NPT came into force in the early 70s and that the established regime has come under particular strain in recent times. This is not a particularly new or original reflection. Leaders and commentators around the globe have made similar judgments. It is also not my view alone that the current situation has implications for Australian nuclear policy, and that business as usual will no longer be adequate to the task. A great deal has already been written about the NPT not being up to dealing with the more complex nuclear landscape. Unilateral actions circumventing its provisions have become commonplace. Since my article was written, Israel has bombed an alleged secret nuclear facility in Syria. Once again, the authority of the NPT and the IAEA, which is charged to oversight compliance with its provisions, have been sidelined in favour of unilateral action and few have complained.

Australia has, until relatively recently, been one of the strongest proponents of the established regime. We sought to defend its integrity, among other things, through best-practice nuclear export policies.

Now Australia has signaled that an a la carte approach to non-proliferation is quite acceptable in some cases. In the name of realism, the Howard government has pledged to sell uranium to India without seeking from India a fraction of what is expected of NPT non-nuclear weapon states, whose membership of the Treaty was to give them privileged access to the fruits of nuclear technology while they renounced the nuclear weapons option. More importantly, neither the US nor Australia used this significant break from policy to exploit the opportunities it offered to stabilise a nuclear environment by engaging India in this enterprise. Quite apart from the problems this decision poses for Australian nuclear export policy and its strong support for non-proliferation, it is questionable, if not outright reckless, to build a closer strategic relationship with Asia's second emerging superpower on as fragile a platform as uranium sales.

Without repeating everything in the original article, its basic message is that the international nonproliferation regime urgently needs rejuvenation and strengthening. We can no longer ignore those powers that have chosen to stay outside it and need them to cooperate in that process. The number of countries with aspirations to develop nuclear power, which can bring them one step closer to a weapons capacity, is increasing. The NPT certainly entitles them to develop the full nuclear fuel cycle should they wish to do so.

Those who think seriously about this problem in the US, including Kissinger et al in the [Wall Street Journal article](#), have drawn the same conclusion. They have called for US leadership to create a new consensus and plan of action to stem the tide of proliferation, both vertical and horizontal. US leadership is essential but not sufficient to achieve this goal. Countries like Australia should be active participants and should show regional and global leadership. In the past we have made a concrete contribution through being a responsible supplier. But we have had a free ride, up to a point, because we have not taken back the spent fuel. We have also had a free ride because we have benefited from the nuclear umbrella provided by the US and have benefited from a relatively contained nuclear world, which is showing early signs of unravelling. This looming threat needs to be met with concerted action and activism. It needs policy approaches which not only concentrate on nuclear technology but which address in an effective way the security concerns of the Middle East and North Asia. It needs policy approaches which provide credible energy alternatives to oil, coal and gas.

An incoming Australian government should devote considerable thought and energy to addressing these issues, including reviving the spirit of Reykjavik and the Canberra Commission. It should understand what the consequences are of a world with between 9 and 15 nuclear-armed states (and maybe 20 more with the capacity to become nuclear weapon states at short notice) and the pressure this will put on our security and that of our region. It should understand the consequences of declining nuclear governance standards in safeguards, safety and security of nuclear materials from terrorist hands, if the international community cannot act with common purpose in halting the decline in all three areas.

It therefore follows that a future government should consider the 'what if' questions too - what if we live in a region with not just one, but two and maybe three nuclear-armed states. I for one hope that the very prospect of Australia needing to revisit its decision not to consider a nuclear deterrent would be sufficient to encourage us to work harder to shore up and strengthen the existing global nuclear governance arrangements and not to further undermine them. This involves more than pious slogans and adherence to old ways of doing things.

To conclude that the logical consequence of this line of argument is to advocate for an Australian nuclear weapon is about as credible as the search for those elusive weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

Acknowledgement

This [essay](#) first appeared in [The Interpreter: Weblog of the Lowy Institute for International Policy](#). Reproduced by kind permission.

Biography

Martine Letts is Deputy Director of the Lowy Institute for International Policy, joining in January 2005 following 4 years as the Secretary General (CEO) of Australian Red Cross and a 17 year career with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. She served as Australian Ambassador to Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay, Deputy Head of Mission and Australian Deputy Permanent Representative to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna and was an adviser to Foreign Minister Evans from 1992 to 1994. Martine Letts specialises in arms control and disarmament.

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