The Re-emergence of an Australian nuclear weapons option?

Recommended Citation

"The Re-emergence of an Australian nuclear weapons option?", APSNet Policy Forum, December 01, 2007, https://nautilus.org/apsnet/the-re-emergence-of-an-australian-nuclear-weapons-option/

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Introduction

Richard Tanter of the Nautilus Institute at RMIT writes that "the first public crack in Australian political elite repudiation of nuclear weapons since the Canberra Commission, if not the signing of the NPT itself, has come from a surprising source: a former advisor to Gareth Evans and a disarmament policy specialist in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade." Tanter notes that "after a brief, apparently tough-minded tour of the bleak nuclear proliferation policy horizon, [Martine] Letts concluded a review of post-election security policy options with a call for a Rudd government to consider the strategic circumstances under which an Australian government should 'revisit the nuclear weapons option'." In the light of Australia's almost two decades of secret pursuit of nuclear weapons until 1972, and the understandable residual Indonesian suspicion about Australia's real nuclear intentions, it would be hard to imagine a policy recommendation with greater risk of contributing to the strategic circumstances it seeks to avoid.

Essay : The re-emergence of an Australian nuclear weapons option?

The question of whether or not Australia should acquire or develop nuclear weapons has been off the policy agenda for many years. From the 1950s onward the Democratic Labor Party argued the case publicly, though to no great policy effect. Yet, as a number of detailed studies by historians and comparative analysts of nuclear proliferation pathways have clearly established, successive Liberal-Country Party coalition governments in the 1950s to the early 1970s were committed to either acquire or develop a nuclear weapon.[1] Public advocacy was always restrained, but in the crucial period from the late 1950s and early 1960s a strong coalition of bureaucratic and military interests, including the civilian nuclear establishment, pressed the issue behind closed doors. While this bureaucratic coalition was largely opposed by other parts of the bureaucracy, in particular the Treasury and the Department of External Affairs, for more than a decade, it was successful in determining Australian policy in secret. The most recent studies of this largely intra-bureaucratic policy struggle have emphasized the extent to which this movement down the proliferation pathway was in fact motivated less by rational threat assessment and more by a combination of institutional self-interest and a surprisingly potent nationalist sense of identity and fantasy within those institutional complexes.[2]

The Whitlam government and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) put an end to two decades of Australian nuclear weapons planning. However residues of that secret history remain evident today. One manifestation is the F-111 fighter bombers, soon to be retired from the Royal Australian Air Force, which were ordered in the expectation that they would be available to deliver nuclear bombs on urban targets in Indonesia. It is hardly surprising that another residue of this covert policy is the memory of Australian nuclear planning held by members of the Indonesian political and military elite.

Since then, public advocacy of Australian nuclear weapons acquisition has been limited to the further fringes of the right of Australian politics.[3] There have been no reports of a revival of nuclear advocacy within either the bureaucracy or the nuclear establishment.[4] On the contrary, Australia has, until recently, been a very strong supporter of the NPT regime, especially following the influence of the very large anti-uranium and nuclear disarmament movements of the 1970s and the 1980s. The Hawke and Keating Labor governments, especially under the Foreign Affairs stewardship of Gareth Evans, ultimately responded to these potent civil society movements by establishing substantial Australian bureaucratic capacity to press arms control and disarmament policies robustly in a number of global policy forums.[5] The creative high point of that government reflection of massive civil society rejection of nuclear weapons was the establishment by Keating and Evans of the Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons in November 1995.[6] The incoming Howard government ignored the Commission's recommendations. Yet by outlining a practical pathway for the implementation of a nuclear abolitionist position in what was correctly seen as the unique circumstances following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Canberra Commission paved the way both politically and analytically for the Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission chaired by Hans Blix, which reported in 2006.[7] Two notable members of the Blix Commission, for Australian concerns, were the architect of the Canberra Commission, Gareth Evans, and the national security advisor to former Indonesian president B.J.Habibie.

The first public crack in Australian political elite repudiation of nuclear weapons since the Canberra Commission, if not the signing of the NPT itself, has come from a surprising source. Martine Letts, a former advisor to Gareth Evans and formerly a disarmament policy specialist in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, opened a recent discussion of "Creative and uncomfortable policy choices ahead" for a Rudd Labor government. In a pre-election essay for the Lowy Institute for International Affairs, Letts suggests that

> An incoming Australian government will need to assess the changed global nuclear environment and develop strategic policy options to protect and project our interests. Some of these options may be controversial and unpopular.[8]

Nuclear proliferation, nuclear terrorism and the global demand for nuclear energy ("a significant, if partial, solution to the global problems of climate change") make up a quite new and threatening context, Letts argued, within which a Rudd government should conduct a full review of Australian nuclear policy. "Australian nuclear policy was shaped by the strategic circumstances of the 1970s". Accordingly, Letts suggested, such a post-election review of nuclear policy should include examination of "our own decisions on the role nuclear weapons will play for the future security of Australia."

After a brief, apparently tough-minded tour of the bleak nuclear proliferation policy horizon, Letts concluded with a call for a Rudd government to consider the circumstances under which an Australian government should revive the nuclear weapons option:

> A thorough nuclear policy review should also consider which strategic circumstances might lead to Australia's revisiting the nuclear weapons option. As extreme as this may sound, failure to sustain and strengthen our current non-proliferation regime may force us to consider such an option. In the current strategic circumstances, no government could leave such an eventuality entirely out of mind.

This surprising conclusion from a disarmament specialist appears to derive from deep pessimism about the NPT regime - a regime "too rigid and inflexible to deal with today's strategic realities", perhaps able to be "modernised" by creating a new category of Protocol states for India, Pakistan and Israel".

As a former Australian Deputy Permanent Representative to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna, Letts is pessimistic about the ability of the official global disarmament and non-proliferation machinery to halt the gathering rush to nuclear possession, and inevitable nuclear next use.[9] This tough-minded pessimism leads Letts to posit an implicit worst case scenario for an arms controller: if proliferation cannot be stopped, what then? It would appear that for Letts, an ethic of responsible policy advice, in the context of a hard-headed assessment of the real world, leads her to the unpalatable recognition that there are some circumstances in which Australia should acquire nuclear weapons. After all, there is no point in recommending a review of such circumstances if one believes that they could never exist.

There are a number of difficulties with Letts' position. The first is that this recommendation is not a matter of hypothetical speculation in an ivory tower. This is realist – if not realistic – policy advice to a government-in-waiting, and Letts expects to be heard. In a policy world where the source of the policy recommendation – a former ambassador and senior government disarmament specialist – matters as much as the content of the recommendation itself – Letts' claim is that there are foreseeable and proximate strategic conditions under which she would feel obliged to recommend that a Rudd government begin the process of acquiring nuclear weapons. As her closing words put it, "In the current strategic circumstances, no government could leave such an eventuality entirely out of mind."

The second limitation is that Letts' approach to a Rudd government nuclear non-proliferation policy is at odds with that of the Labor Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs, Robert McClelland. In a

speech to the United Nations Association of Australia and the Medical Association for the Prevention of War (MAPW) earlier this year McClelland argued that a Rudd Labor government should and would go well beyond the conventional arms control agenda to embrace the agenda of practical steps towards ultimate nuclear abolition recommended by the Canberra Commission, the Blix Commission and the Middle Powers Initiative launched in October 2005 by the Article VI Forum.[10] That forum aims to

> identify the legal, political and technical requirements for the elimination of nuclear weapons…" and to undertake "informational and preparatory work on the development and implementation of the legal political and technical elements and the exploration of ways to start negotiations on disarmament steps leading to a nuclear weapons convention or a framework of instruments for the abolition of nuclear weapons.

This is, argued McClelland, "precisely the sort of agenda that an Australian government working as a responsible middle power could and should progress". In an era where even state-centred realist policy analysis recognizes the importance of soft power, the Canberra Commission, and a genuine, even-handed approach to both arms control and disarmament become palpable resources for a government seeking to contribute to the de-escalating of nuclear proliferation pressures. Such initiatives also create the possibility of re-building policy links with regional allies like Malaysia and Indonesia, which have been stretched more than is usually recognised by the virulence of Australia's support for US policy in Iraq and Afghanistan.

McClelland's brief analysis of the nuclear landscape differs from Letts' by focussing on a realistic assessment of the risks of nuclear next use in a strategic picture where nuclear deterrence theory is increasingly implausible. His reading of the US institutional landscape is clearer, stressing the attempts by a gathering body of former US nuclear hawks to press the case for the military inutility – to say nothing of their inherent genocidal qualities - of nuclear weapons on both Republican and Democrat candidates.[11] Whoever wins the November 24 election will be dealing with a different environment in Washington, in the aftermath of the strategic failures of the Bush administration.

The third issue with Letts' analysis is its partiality and incompleteness. Nuclear power is to be promoted to help with global warming. Australia should take back nuclear waste, "for which Australian geological structures are highly suited". Uranium should be exported to India. Iran and North Korea should be prevented from moving further down the nuclear pathway, but India, Pakistan and Israel given a ticket of leave. This is as much obeisance to alliance maintenance, virtually identical to Bush administration policy and its Global Nuclear Enterprise Partnership (GNEP), as "a careful cost benefit analysis".

As with much tough-minded, "let's face facts", realism, the full context of such decision-making is ignored. The consequences of such blatant, if commonplace, application of double-standards on regional thinking about proliferation does not enter into the calculations. Since for Japan the most important barrier to nuclear proliferation, should the US door be opened (as seems very possible [12]), is the opprobrium it would draw on itself in leaving the NPT, such collusion in the erosion of the NPT in the name of saving it by an Australian government would seem almost wanton.

But the most serious consequence of Letts' re-admission of the nuclear option to the Australian policy agenda must surely be registered amongst opinion leaders – and opinion makers - in the country with which Australia has the most to lose in the long run: Indonesia. In the light of Australia's almost two decades of secret pursuit of nuclear weapons until 1972, and the

understandable residual Indonesian suspicion about Australia's real nuclear intentions, it would be hard to imagine a policy recommendation with greater risk of contributing to the strategic circumstances it seeks to avoid.

Realism is not synonymous with tough-mindedness, though as Australian foreign policy becomes more militarised, this may be less evident. In much the same way as recent Howard government statements of security policy[13] Letts' would-be realist rationale for the reluctant opening of the door to Australian nuclear weapons is the product of an incomplete and one sided – and hence inadequately realist - assessment of the indeed frightening drift to nuclear next use.

Australian nuclear policy does indeed need to be reviewed. But such reconsideration of our current policy failures needs to be genuinely and comprehensively realist, informed by abiding commitments to the avoidance of nuclear next-use, and eschewing any suggestion that if our half-hearted arms control measures do not bear fruit, then Australia too will take the genocidal option, and once again and try to join the nuclear club.

Information about the author

Richard Tanter is Senior Research Associate at Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainability and Director of the Nautilus Institute at RMIT. He has written widely on Japanese security policy, including 'With Eyes Wide Shut: Japan, Heisei Militarization and the Bush Doctrine' in Melvin Gurtov and Peter Van Ness (eds.), Confronting the Bush Doctrine: Critical Views from the Asia-Pacific, (New York: Routledge, 2005). His most recent book, co-edited with Gerry Van Klinken and Desmond Ball, is Masters of Terror: Indonesia's Military and Violence in East Timor in 1999 [second edition].

Other policy forums by Richard Tanter:

- The Abuses of Realism and Australian Security Interests: the 2007 Defence Update, Richard Tanter, Austral Policy Forum 07-14A, 12 July 2007.
- The new security architecture: Binding Japan and Australia, containing China - Richard Tanter, Austral Policy Forum 07-07A, 15 March 2007
- Ten questions about East Timor for which we need answers: Richard Tanter, Austral Policy Forum 06-18A 8 June 2006
- The MSDF Indian Ocean deployment - blue water militarization in a "normal country": Richard Tanter, Austral Policy Forum: 06-10A 30 March 2006

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End notes

[1] Key historians and analysts of the first Australian proliferation attempt include Alice Cawte, Wayne Reynolds, Richard Broinowski, Jim Walsh and Jacques Hymans. See Australia nuclear proliferation history - resource list, Reframing Australia-Indonesia Security Relations, Nautilus Institute. For two short introduction to this history see Richard Broinowski, Australian nuclear weapons: the story so far, Austral Policy Forum 06-23A 17 July 2006, and Australia's Nuclear History, Rear Vision, ABC Radio National, 4 June 2006.
[2] See Jim Walsh, Surprise Down Under: The Secret History of Australia's Nuclear Ambitions, Nonproliferation Review 5 (Fall 1997), and Jacques Hymans, "Isotopes and Identity: Australia and the Nuclear Weapons Option, 1949-1999", Nonproliferation Review, Vol. 7, No. 1, Spring, 2000.

[3] The rump DLP still does so today: the DLP website calls for “Development of nuclear engineering and power generating capabilities for peaceful purposes that facilitate future options for acquiring a nuclear deterrent capacity if international efforts to limit proliferation of nuclear weapons fail or the nuclear umbrella of our allies can no longer be guaranteed.”, Democratic Labor Party Policies, accessed 29 October 2007.
[4] But for a brief review of Howard government nuclear activities, see Richard Broinowski, Australia's New Nuclear Ambitions, Austral Policy Forum 06-24A 24 July 2006.
[5] The first years of the Hawke government were somewhat less robust o these matters. See Richard Tanter, Nuclear disarmament: does Australia have a role? - Or, A Day at the Arms Races, paper presented to the Australian Institute of Political Science colloquium, Melbourne, March 1986.
[6] Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons – Introduction. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.
[7] Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission.
[8] Martine Letts, “Creative and uncomfortable policy choices ahead”, Voters' guide to international policy, Chapter 6, Lowy Institute for International Policy, October 2007.
[9] On pathways to nuclear next use and its prevention, see Nautilus Institute, Who Will Stop Nuclear Next Use? Global Scenarios 2004 Workshop, April 27-28, 2004.
[10] A New Agenda for Australia in Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, Robert McClelland, 13 September 2007, Austral Policy Forum 07-17A.
[11] Henry Kissinger, George Schultz, William Perry and Sam Nunn, A World Free of Nuclear Weapons, The Wall Street Journal, January 4, 2007. Letts refers to this article, but does not build on its implications.
[12] Richard Tanter, 'With Eyes Wide Shut: Japan, Heisei Militarization and the Bush Doctrine' in Melvin Gurtov and Peter Van Ness (eds.), Confronting the Bush Doctrine: Critical Views from the Asia-Pacific, (New York: Routledge, 2005).
[13] The Abuses of Realism and Australian Security Interests: the 2007 Defence Update, Austral Policy Forum 07-14A 12 July 2007.

Response by Martine Letts:

> A reply to Richard Tanter — by Richard Tanter — last modified 2007-11-11 17:59,
> Martine Letts, 12 November 2007, Austral Policy Forum 07-20B

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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