

Australia's opposition to a ban on nuclear weapons



Recommended Citation

Tim Wright, "Australia's opposition to a ban on nuclear weapons", NAPSNet Blue Peter, December 01, 2015, <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/australias-opposition-to-a-ban-on-nuclear-weapons/>

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December 1, 2015

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Australia has positioned itself as the de facto leader of a loose grouping of US-allied nations working to prevent the start of negotiations on a global treaty outlawing nuclear weapons.

At this year's session of the UN General Assembly's First Committee on disarmament, Australia coordinated several joint statements intended to thwart moves towards a ban.

For the past two years, it has been among the most vocal and active opponents of the fast-growing movement to prohibit the use, production and stockpiling of nuclear weapons, which are the only WMD not yet explicitly banned.

It has refused to accept the view of four-fifths of the UN membership that any use of nuclear weapons would be unacceptable on humanitarian grounds.

Indeed, it has sought to establish a counter-narrative: that humanitarian concerns must be balanced against the (supposed) security benefits of nuclear weapons.

Although Australia does not possess a nuclear arsenal of its own, it claims to be protected by the so-called "nuclear umbrella" of the United States.

"As long as nuclear weapons exist, Australia will continue to rely on US nuclear forces to deter nuclear attack on Australia," the foreign ministry says.

Most other members of the Australian-led group - which consists of around two dozen nations - also believe in the necessity of nuclear weapons for their own security, without actually possessing them.

Although the group does concede that the prohibition of nuclear weapons would "probably" be necessary "to maintain a world without nuclear weapons", it argues that a ban should not be pursued prior to elimination.

But for other categories of indiscriminate weapons, establishing a clear global prohibition on use and possession has been vital to advancing the goal of elimination.

Once a weapon is declared illegal, it quickly loses its political value - making it harder for nations to retain stockpiles.

The great gains in abolishing chemical weapons and land mines, for instance, could not have been made without the international conventions prohibiting those weapons.

Voting at the UN

Four important new resolutions on nuclear disarmament were introduced this October at the UN.

One contained the so-called Humanitarian Pledge – a commitment “to fill the legal gap for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons”.

It attracted the support of 128 nations, with Australia among 29 nations to vote no.

A similar resolution, on the “humanitarian consequences” of nuclear weapons, stressed “that it is in the interest of the very survival of humanity that nuclear weapons are never used again, under any circumstances”.

But this, too, was a step too far for Australia and most other members of its group.

They objected to the words “under any circumstances”, prompting Sweden to ask: “When would it be in the interest of humanity that nuclear weapons are used?”

A third resolution declared nuclear weapons to be “inherently immoral”. But again, they balked.

In a defensively worded statement on behalf of 27 nations, Australia complained that the resolutions sought “to marginalize and delegitimize certain policy perspectives and positions”.

This, indeed, was their intention: they challenged “nuclear deterrence” theory, which in essence endorses the retention and potential use of nuclear weapons.

The Australian-led group bemoaned the lack of “unity” in recent disarmament debates – seemingly oblivious to its own role in creating divisions.

It lumped blame on those seeking to highlight the inhumane nature of nuclear weapons, rather than those continuing defiantly to wield these weapons.

The most controversial of the four resolutions was one to establish a subsidiary body of the UN General Assembly “to negotiate with a view to reaching agreement on concrete and effective legal measures to achieve nuclear disarmament”.

The Australian-led group, fearing that it would become a forum for starting work on a treaty banning nuclear weapons, strenuously resisted the inclusion of “negotiate” in the mandate.

Speaking on behalf of 19 nations, Australia proposed a series of major edits to the draft – some of which were accepted. Most notably, the subsidiary body will now only “substantively address” new legal measures.

But even this significant concession was not enough to secure Australia’s support: it abstained from voting on the resolution.

The new body will meet in Geneva in 2016 and is widely expected to begin discussions on the elements for a treaty banning nuclear weapons.

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