

The temptation to go beyond conventional long-range strike

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Australia is enhancing its long-range strike capabilities through purchasing Tomahawk Land Attack Missiles (TLAM) and Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile (JASSM). The Defence Strategic Review (DSR) intimated the development of hypersonic weapons (Department of Defence, 2023, p. 72). These capabilities are required under the DSR to achieve the strategic outcome of deterrence through denial (Department of Defence, 2023, p. 32). But there is a temptation to take this conversation further into nuclear weapons. Conflating discussions on Nuclear-powered submarines through AUKUS, calls for nuclear power generation in Australia ([Dutton, 2023](#)), long-range strike capabilities and deterrence leads to the question—should Australia go the extra distance to have a nuclear long-range strike capability?

To avoid this article being misused and ensure clarity, I argue the answer is no.

Nuclear weapons are not often debated as part of Australia's broader discussion on security. Since mutually assured destruction has prevented the active use of nuclear weapons in the last 70 years, they appear as a weapon from a previous era of great power competition. Australia does not have nuclear weapons, so the conversation regarding national security moves to the conventional capabilities that Australia does have. However, nuclear weapons underpin our entire defence strategy, as reiterated in the Defence Strategic Review:

In our current strategic circumstances, the risk of nuclear escalation must be regarded as real. Our best protection against the risk of nuclear escalation is the United States' extended nuclear deterrence, and the pursuit of new avenues of arms control. (Department of Defence, 2023, p. 38)

The basis of this extended nuclear deterrence is the ANZUS treaty. While conventional benefits, such as access to US military equipment and intelligence, and engagement with the US, such as Exercise TALISMAN SABRE, are more visible elements of the ANZUS alliance, the potential for nuclear deterrence through this alliance is paramount for national defence.

While the debate on nuclear deterrence still endures, history provides reasonable evidence that nuclear deterrence is effective (Waltz, 1990, pp. 738-740). The idea behind nuclear deterrence 'depends on what one can do, not on what one will do. What deters is the fact that we can do as much damage to them as we choose, and they to us. The country suffering the retaliatory attack cannot limit the damage done to it; only the retaliator can do that.' Importantly though, Waltz considered that nuclear deterrence 'works not against minor aggression at the periphery, but only against major aggression at the centre, of international politics.' (Waltz, 1990, p. 733) However, there is a more energized debate regarding the limited credibility of conventional deterrence (Haffa, 2018, pp. 97-99).

Long-range conventional strike may be able to deliver dozens, if not hundreds, of missiles at the cost of many millions of dollars per missile, but there is no guarantee the damage delivered would be credible in deterring a determined opposition. Also, the impact of conventional deterrence through long-range strike can be mitigated with effective missile

defence. This would explain why Australia is seeking an Integrated Air and Missile Defence capability (Department of Defence, 2023, p. 69). The discussion of conventional deterrence for Australia cannot be de-linked from the potential for extended nuclear deterrence through our alliance with the US as transitioning to conflict would likely result in the activation of the ANZUS alliance.

If conventional deterrence is not seen as credible in deterring an aggressor then nuclear weapons could appear to be the next logical step. Australia had an early history of exploring options for nuclear weapons since allowing Britain to conduct nuclear tests in the 1950s to exploring nuclear power as a hedging option for nuclear weapons in the 1960s. This ceased under Gough Whitlam in 1973 with the ratification of the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) (Lantis, 2008, pp. 23-24). The continued alliance with the US has been the means by which Australia has sought protection from nuclear threats as shown above.

If Australia were to move beyond its current agreements under the NPT and commence a nuclear weapons program, then there are historical examples to draw from that describe the likely international response. The decision and action to build a nuclear weapon would undoubtedly be done with extreme secrecy (like the Taiwan nuclear weapons program from 1964-1988 (Fitzpatrick, 2016, pp. 127-132)); however, the enterprise requires significant time, money, resources and people that prohibit it from being undetectable. From the diplomatic engagements between the US and Taiwan following the discovery of their programs in 1977 and 1988 (Fitzpatrick, 2016, pp. 130, 132), the inevitable discovery of a hypothetical Australian nuclear weapons program would most likely prompt a swift and escalating reaction from the US as follows.

A senior level US diplomatic delegation would promptly visit Australia. It would outline the consequences of breaking our agreements under the NPT. The likely next step would be to state that the ANZUS treaty is suspended and that access to all US military support and capabilities will be denied. The impact of this would be profound on Australia's military capabilities. Our access to US, and likely many other countries, intelligence products and capabilities would be denied. Access to military equipment, spare parts, US defence contractors and support that enables major systems and weapons would be lost as Australia's access to International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR) arrangements would be denied. US military personnel in Australia would be restricted in their interaction with the ADF or withdrawn from Australia. The withdrawal of major US deployments would have a financial impact on states and territories, especially Darwin if the Marine Rotational Force – Darwin (MRF-D) was withdrawn. This could have the equivalent impact on the ADF as occurred to the Iranian military after the 1979 Islamic revolution where the US withdrew support for major equipment, such as F-14 Tomcat ([Axe, 2020](#)), supplies and personnel.

If this were not enough to dissuade senior Australia government officials from ceasing an Australian nuclear weapons program then the next tranche of measures would likely be economic and diplomatic sanctions extending up to those seen against North Korea and Iran in recent history. The US could leverage its considerable means to restrict Australia's ability to import or export key goods and services.

Additional restrictions on Australian individuals with specialist knowledge and skills in the numerous fields associated with nuclear weapons and advanced technology could be applied. Australians with expertise in space, nuclear, semiconductors, AI, quantum computers and many other fields of advanced technology could find themselves excluded from programs connected with the US. This would be similar to the restrictions faced by Chinese Companies ([Reuters, 2022](#)).

Australian government officials would be offered an opportunity to avoid this by completely, absolutely and openly dismantling the hypothetical Australian nuclear weapons program. This would be similar to the efforts undertaken by Taiwan in dismantling their nuclear weapons program in 1988 where the hot cells were dismantled, and the research reactor was shut down

and sealed off with concrete (Fitzpatrick, 2016, p. 132).

There is no Australian nuclear weapons program, but an energised discussion in this area provides fertile ground for adversaries to build a narrative against Australia. China is already attempting to build a narrative against Australia, claiming Australia is seeking nuclear proliferation through gaining nuclear-powered submarines under AUKUS (Smith, 2023). Acceptance of this narrative could jeopardise Australia's ability to pursue nuclear medicine and power technology, and the export of Uranium ore as part of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). It could increase the enduring cost of inspection regimes under the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to confirm that Australia does not intend to develop a nuclear weapons program.

The importance of the ANZUS alliance for Australia's national defence has been stated above but the alliance requires enduring maintenance. Australia has done so over the length of the alliance and reaped significant benefits, such as Australia being the only other country with access to EA-18G Growler. However, care has to be taken to ensure that Australia maintains its sovereignty and independence in strategic decision-making. Just as the US would in deciding how to respond if Australia requested support under ANZUS. An unjustified provocative action by Australia resulting in an escalation to conflict does not automatically grant Australia access to the US extended nuclear deterrence.

Keeping the US engaged with the ANZUS alliance and within the region is of the utmost importance. Now is not the time for Australia to embark on an unconstrained discussion about Australia generating a long-range nuclear strike capability. Informed discussion about nuclear weapons is important and needs to include the full consequences of having this discussion, let alone the consequences of moving beyond a conventional long-range strike capability.

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