# Going Nuclear in the Antipodes: Australia's Megadeath Complex

by Binoy Kampmark via james - Counterpunch *Monday, Jul 8 2019, 2:57am*
international / prose / post

> The antipodes has had a fraught relationship with the nuclear option. At the distant ends of the earth, New Zealand took a stand against the death complex, assuming the forefront of restricting the deployment of nuclear assets in its proximity. This drove Australia bonkers with moral envy and strategic fury. The New Zealand Nuclear Free Zone, Disarmament and Arms Control Act 1987 made the country a nuclear and biological weapons-free area. It was a thumbing, defiant gesture against the United States, but what is sometimes forgotten is that it was also a statement to other powers – including France – who might venture to experiment and test their weapons in the Pacific environs.

The Lange government had made an anti-nuclear platform indispensable to an independent foreign policy, one that caused a fair share of consternation in Washington. The satellite was misbehaving, and seeking to break free from its US orbit. "If we don't pass this law, if we don't declare ourselves nuclear free," insisted Prime Minister David Lange, "we will have anarchy on the harbours and in the streets."

An important provision of the Act remains clause 9(2): "The Prime Minister may only grant approval for the entry into the internal waters of New Zealand by foreign warships if the Prime Minister is satisfied that the warships will not be carrying any nuclear explosive device upon their entry into the internal waters of New Zealand."

The reaction from the US Congress was a cool one: the Broomfield Act was duly passed in the House: an ally had been recast as a somewhat disregarding "friend". It urged New Zealand to "reconsider its decision and law denying port access to certain US ships" and "resume its obligations under the ANZUS Treaty." Various "security assistance and arms export preferences" to New Zealand would be suspended till the President determined that the country was compliant with the Treaty.

As Anglo-American retainer and policing authority of the Pacific, Australia has had sporadic flirts with the nuclear option, one shadowing the creation of the Australian National University, the Woomera Rocket Range and the Snowy Mountains hydro-electricity scheme. Australian territory had been used, and abused, by British forces keen to test Albion's own acquisition of an atomic option. The Maralinga atomic weapons test range remains a poisoned reminder of that period, but was hoped to be a prelude to establishing an independent Australia nuclear force. Cooperation with Britain was to be key, and Australian defence spending, including the acquisition of 24 pricey F-111 fighter bombers from the US in the 1960s, was premised on a deliverable nuclear capability.

During John Gorton's short stint as prime minister in the late 1960s, rudimentary efforts were made at Jervis Bay to develop what would have been a reactor capable of generating plutonium under the broad aegis of the Australian Atomic Energy Commission. Gorton's premiership ended in 1971; Australia slid back into the sheltering comforts of Washington's unverifiable nuclear umbrella.

The influential chairman of the AAEC, Philip Baxter, who held the reins between 1956 and 1972 with

a passion for secrecy, never gave up his dream of encouraging the production of weapons grade plutonium. It led historian Ann Moyal to reflect on the "problems and danger of closed government", with nuclear policy framed "through the influence of one powerful administrator surrounded by largely silent men".

Nuclear weapons have a habit of inducing the worst of human traits. Envy, fear, and pride tend to coagulate, producing a nerdish disposition that tolerates mass murder in the name of faux strategy. With the boisterous emergence of China, Australian academics and security hacks have been bitten by the nuclear bug. In 2018, Stephan Frühling, Associate Dean of the College of Asia and the Pacific at the Australian National University fantasised about adorning the Australian coastline with tactical, short-range nuclear weapons.

It was a fantasy he was happy to recommend to audiences tuning in to the ABC's Late Night Live. "In air and naval battle on the high seas, nukes can now be employed without significant risk of collateral damage much like conventional warheads." Such thinking has the hallmarks of redux insanity in the field of nuclear thinking, the sort that deems such weapons equivalent in their characteristics to conventional types.

And what of the much vaunted US nuclear umbrella? By stepping out of it, Australia was surely making a statement of cranky independence. Frühling's suggestion is symptomatic of a field filled with syndromes and disorders. "Before investing in a nuclear program I think we would have to make a genuine attempt at trying to draw closer to the United States and its nuclear arsenal." By stepping out, you have to be stepping in.

His work exudes a lingering suspicion that the ANZUS treaty binding both Australia and the United States remains foamy and indistinct on the issue of territorial defence. Since Vietnam, there has been little by way of joint operations in the Pacific between the two. The treaty's preamble outlining the allies' need to "declare publicly and formally their sense of unity, so that no potential aggressor could be under any illusion that any of them stand alone in the Pacific Area" remains distinctly free of evidence and logistical heft.

Other authors who claim to be doyens of Australian strategic thinking also fear the seize-the-prize intentions of the Yellow Peril and a half-hearted Uncle Sam keen to look away from "the Indo-Pacific and its allies." Paul Dibb, Richard Brabin-Smith and Brendan Sargeant, all with ANU affiliations, call for "a radically new defence policy," which might be read as a terror of the US imperium in retreat. For Dibb, Australia "should aim for greater defence self-reliance." This would involve "developing a Defence Force capable of denying our approaches to a well-armed adversary capable of engaging us in sustained high-intensity conflict."

Such writings suggest an element of the unhinged at play. The paternal protector snubs the child; the child goes mad and seeks comfort in suitable toys. Brabin-Smith broods over the end of extended nuclear deterrence, "not just for us but for other US allies in the Pacific, Japan especially." This might well precipitate nuclear proliferation in the Pacific, requiring "Australia to review its own position on nuclear weapons."

Not wishing to be left off the increasingly crowded nuclear wagon, Australia's long standing commentator on China, Hugh White, has also put his oar in, building up the pro-nuclear argument in what he calls a "difficult and uncomfortable" question. (Age does have its own liberating qualities.) Having suggested in 2017 that the China-US tussle in the Pacific would eventually lead to a victory for Beijing, he has his own recipe for a re-ordering of the Australian defence establishment. How to Defend Australia suggests what needs to be done and, as is the nature of such texts, what the

bunglers in the security establishment are actually doing. It is also a paean about future loss. “We have been very fortunate to live under America’s protection for so long and we will sorely miss it when it is gone.”

White advocates an Australian Defence Force heavily reliant on sinking flotillas: “only ships can carry the vast amounts of material required for a major land campaign”. Sell most of the surface vessels, he urges; abandon existing plans to build more; build a fleet of 24 to 36 submarines and increase defence spending from the current levels of 2% to 3.5%.

Then comes the issue of a nuclear capability, previously unneeded given the pillowing comforts of the US umbrella, underpinned by the assurance that Washington was “the primary power in Asia”. White shows more consideration than other nuclear groupies in acknowledging the existential dangers. Acquiring such weapons would come at a Mephistophelian cost. “It would make us less secure in some ways, that’s why in some ways I think it’s appalling.”

The nuclear call doing the rounds in Canberra is a bit of old man’s bravado, and a glowering approach to the non-proliferation thrust of the current international regime. Should Australia embark on a nuclear program, it is bound to coalescence a range of otherwise divided interests across the country. It will also thrill other nuclear aspirants excoriated for daring to obtain such an option. The mullahs in Iran will crow, North Korea will be reassured, and states in the Asian-Pacific may well reconsider their benign status.



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