



# Emerging strategic risks in the Asia-Pacific and the impact on the nuclear non- proliferation regime

## The Australian perspective

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# Executive summary

**Australian nuclear-powered submarines may bring nuclear power, and maybe nuclear weapons, slightly closer to Australia's grasp and may encourage other states to go in the same direction.**

## Australian strategic threat perceptions:

- Australia perceives China to drive many (but not all) of the strategic threats and risks that Canberra faces, and there is bipartisan convergence on the policy on China.
- A specific concern in Australia is the prospect of a US war with China over Taiwan or several other crisis points, as well as the trade-offs that this would present.
- Australian support for the US-Australia alliance is strong, and it is likely that Australia would become involved in any such conflict, because US bases and intelligence facilities in Australia are central to the operation of US military systems in the region. However, the degree to which the Australian public would support the US if a war broke out is more unclear.

## Australian attitudes to nuclear weapons:

- One of the most important developments in Australia's national security portfolio was the AUKUS deal to acquire nuclear powered submarines, along with a spate of other technological upgrades.
- Australian nuclear-powered submarines may bring nuclear power, and maybe nuclear weapons, slightly closer to Australia's grasp and may encourage other states to go in the same direction, which would place more pressure on the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).
- Although the current Australian government is a strong supporter of the global nuclear non-proliferation regime and has no intentions of pursuing nuclear weapons, it cannot guarantee that its successors will not harbour different ambitions.

## The future of the nuclear non-proliferation regime

- A nuclear-armed Australia remains a highly unlikely scenario, but one which could take place if the viability of the US-Australia alliance was threatened, for example due to insufficient commitment by Australia in a US-China conflict over Taiwan, that might put the viability of the US-Australia alliance and US extended deterrence into question.

# Australian strategic threat perceptions: continuity amidst change

The forces that are driving this convergence in Australian Liberal and Labor party outlooks are the recent foreign and defence policies of China.

The Albanese Labor government has been in office for less than a year, so its national security concerns, priorities, and strategic risk perceptions are still somewhat unclear. However, the main contours of the current Labor Government's approach to the strategic challenges in the Indo-Pacific remain remarkably similar to those of the preceding Morrison and Turnbull Liberal Governments. The key Australian statement on the topic during this period was Turnbull's speech at the 2017 Shangri-La Dialogue, in which he vowed to stand up for the "continued stability and peace of this region, a condition which can only be achieved if all nations can pursue their own destinies free of coercion or interference".<sup>1</sup> When meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping, Prime Minister Albanese stated that Australia and China would "cooperate where we can, disagree where we must, and engage in our national interest".<sup>2</sup> Former Prime Ministers Turnbull and Morrison would have fully agreed with that.

The forces that are driving this convergence in Australian Liberal and Labor party outlooks are the recent foreign and defence policies of China. If one was to randomly select ten Australian national security experts at any time since the onset of COVID-19 – or perhaps as early as Turnbull's Shangri-La speech – and ask them to list the ten most serious national security threats facing Australia, China would likely loom large in at least two thirds of these one hundred threats. Many Australians are alarmed by China's involvement in territorial disputes in the Taiwan Strait, South China Sea, East China Sea, China-India border, Senkaku Islands, and elsewhere, as well as its likely involvement in any North Korean crisis or conflict, to say nothing of its role in global warming and human rights violations.

Beijing's economic threats and coercion against Australia and others, as well as its Belt and Road Initiative vision for the Indo-Pacific as an alternative to the current US system, are also perceived in Australia as highly threatening. A decade ago, one could find just as many Australians who would argue that China is such a useful business partner that Australia should turn a blind eye to its undesirable foreign and defence policies, but that is no longer the case today. The specific Australian concern is that China's desire to reduce or even eliminate US influence in the Indo-Pacific might at worst cause a substantially reduced US presence in the Indo-Pacific. Alternatively, there is a concern, which for most Australian observers is perceived as much more likely, that this desire on China's part could bring about a war with the United States unlike one Australia has ever known, which would drag Canberra in. After all, US alliances in the Indo-Pacific are not additive to US power but multiplicative: the benefits that the US-Australia alliance offers to the United States in any war with China amount to much more than just the addition of US and Australian power. China is aware of this multiplicative effect and US bases/joint facilities in Australia would likely be targeted in any US war with China.

A more specific concern – which many Australian national security professionals have only recently begun to publicly talk about – is the prospect of a US war with China over Taiwan and the acute trade-offs this would present for Australia.<sup>3</sup> Many now worry that Chinese forces will launch an amphibious invasion of the island in a few years. If an armed conflict was to arise, the Biden administration or its successor might warn Canberra that no military commitment, or perhaps an insufficient military

commitment, would tear up - or at least weaken - the US-Australia alliance that has come to be central to Liberal and Labor Australian national security policy.

It is likely that Australia would be involved in any such conflict on the US side, because US bases and intelligence facilities in Australia are central to the operation of US military systems in the region. But going too far in such a conflict would risk Australia getting into a war with China that would be many times more dangerous and destructive than Australia's recent experiences with the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan. Not going far enough with the United States could risk the US-Australia alliance such that if Australia finds itself in trouble later, Canberra would have to deal with much more powerful and threatening foes independently. According to a 2022 Lowy Institute Poll, many Australians (though not a majority) seem to agree that it is worth joining a fight with China for the sake of a US-Australia alliance and a robust US role in the Indo-Pacific, but this attitude could change if Australia actually had to fight.<sup>4</sup> A recent study by the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney found that almost half of its respondents were willing to send military forces to help the United States defend Taiwan.<sup>5</sup> Such is life with the ambiguous alliance that Australia has; the text of the US-Australia alliance only commits Canberra and Washington to "act" to meet the common danger to the "Pacific area".<sup>6</sup>

This basic threat and the trade-offs that it presents helps shape Australia's approach to many of its most pressing national security challenges including the spread of nuclear weapons and the dangers these pose to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). For example, the Australian public is aware of China's extensive missile and nuclear arms modernisation program but tends to see this threat as part and parcel of the China challenge.<sup>7</sup> Australians look to the United States to deal with the Chinese military threat, so they tend to also look to Washington to deal with the Chinese nuclear threat. Most of the more threatening moves that China has directed at Australia have, after all, tended to involve economic sanctions and threats, foreign interference, especially regarding Chinese nationals in Australia, and the undermining of Australia's democratic institutions. More recently, Australian officials and some Australian media sources have become more concerned about Chinese nuclear weapons, China's nuclear arms modernisation, and its missiles. One aftertaste of the Trump administration is the reminder – which also raised its head many times during the Cold War – that Australia must take greater responsibility for its own security.<sup>8</sup>

Nuclear weapons also loom large for Australia in the North Korean nuclear threat. But here too, Australian leaders have tended to look and cling tightly to the United States, which also has alliances with most of North Korea's other adversaries. Turnbull, for example, responded to a 2016 North Korean nuclear threat that referenced Australia, saying that Canberra and Washington were "joined at the hip."<sup>9</sup> The Albanese government has had little to say publicly about North Korea's recent spate of missile tests, and that silence has been noteworthy; China seems to have overtaken North Korea as Australia's main nuclear threat.

There are several other areas of concern that have garnered bipartisan support from consecutive governments, including a

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perceived low possibility of a reset with China; a warm embrace of the US-Australia alliance; a quiet acceptance if not embrace of US nuclear weapons; and a growing acceptance of the risk of a conventional or nuclear war with China. These concerns have spurred real change on the ground, for instance through the upgrading of US facilities and bases in Australia. Since a decade ago, when Prime Minister Gillard agreed with President Obama to rotate over two hundred US troops through Northern Australia, over two thousand US personnel now rotate through Darwin between March and October each year. The rotational presence of US nuclear capable B-52 bombers at RAAF Base Tindal in Katherine will also increase, with a US force posture initiative that is designed to further improve interoperability and upgrade airfields, fuel storage facilities, accommodation, and training areas. This initiative followed a visit by senior US military commanders towards the end of Morrison's term to the Pine Gap facility in the Northern Territory, which is central to US surveillance and intelligence gathering throughout the Indo-Pacific.<sup>10</sup> Tindal could well be an important US base for its nuclear bombers, as it is out of range of a number of Chinese and North Korean missiles, unlike more vulnerable bases in Japan and Guam. These and other bases and facilities would be high on China's target list in the event of any crisis or conflict. This concern is not a new one and has been with Australian policymakers since the early Cold War, when the political debate was often fierce. Now, however, there seems to be strong bipartisan support for these developments. Indeed, between two thirds and three quarters of Australians tend to support this US presence, or even desire a greater one.<sup>11</sup> The 2022 Lowy Institute poll found that while 87% of Australians believe that the US-Australia alliance is very important or fairly important to Australia, 46% of Australians believe that Australia should "support" the United States in a conflict, while 51% prefer neutrality.<sup>12</sup>

If the Taiwan conflict and related questions have presented unresolvable challenges for Australian policymakers, Australia has also found itself in a quandary regarding nuclear weapons. Canberra appreciates that its US ally is armed with nuclear weapons and, as long as nuclear weapons exists, it would prefer that the United States is armed with them. However, Canberra is also committed to stop the spread of nuclear weapons and to limit the dangers that US and other nuclear states pose to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. Indeed, few Australians would be comfortable with the strategic reality that it is the increasing accuracy and lethality of US nuclear weapons – what Keir Lieber and Daryl Press have called the counterforce revolution – that is rationally driving the Chinese and Russian arms modernisation programmes.<sup>13</sup>

Russia, its nuclear weapons, and complicated relationship with China received much less attention in Australia before President Putin made the decision to invade Ukraine. Many Australians would argue that Russia no longer plays a significant role in the Indo-Pacific. One of the more interesting debates in Australia, in light of recent events, is whether US preoccupation with the Russia-Ukraine war might embolden China to take a pot shot at Taiwan. This would further endanger the Taiwan Strait, and in so doing, also endanger Australia. Less remarked upon is the reality that if Putin encountered the struggles that he has on land, Xi would surely struggle just as much, if not more, over and under water. If anything, the support that Ukraine has managed to receive from

Western allies, and the difficulties that Russia has encountered, have made a Chinese invasion of Taiwan less likely, if there was ever any relationship between the likelihood of conflict in these two disparate theatres in the first place. But the fact that these latter possibilities were hardly considered in Australia speaks to the fear that Australians have of any prospect for Chinese conflict with Taiwan that would drag Canberra in.<sup>14</sup>

A more recent addition to Australia's approach to Indo-Pacific security, is the consideration of the greater role Japan would play in Australian efforts, as well as the quadrilateral strategic partnership – commonly known as the QUAD – that also involves India. More recently, Australia has attempted to expand its network of partners involved in the common goal of a stable and rule-based Indo-Pacific order which also now includes countries like South Korea, Vietnam, Britain, and France. Areas of cooperation include resolving supply chain vulnerability, access to critical minerals and energy sources at affordable prices, addressing climate change and other transnational challenges that require a team effort. Australia has been actively working to develop and participate in multilateral endeavours to address these challenges. Albanese's further cementing of the comprehensive strategic partnership with India, the October 22 Australia-Japan Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation, and the Oman-Australia submarine communications cable all pick up where his Liberal predecessors left off.



# Australian attitudes to nuclear weapons

**One of the most important developments in Australia's national security portfolio was walking away from an agreement with France to acquire submarines and signing up to a new deal with the United States and the United Kingdom – AUKUS – to acquire nuclear powered submarines.**

One of the most important developments in Australia's national security portfolio was the Morrison government's decision to walk away from an agreement with France to acquire submarines. No less momentous was Canberra signing up to a new deal with the United States and the United Kingdom – AUKUS – to acquire nuclear powered submarines, along with a spate of other technological upgrades. Australia has committed to acquire nuclear powered submarines, but exactly what vessels Australia will acquire remains unclear at the time of writing, although the delivery is estimated for the late 2030s. Indeed, Morrison's initial announcement was remarkable almost as much for what it did not say as for what it did. An oft-heard argument was that advances in competitors' submarines meant that Australia requires the more silent propulsion that nuclear power offers. But how the Albanese government approaches this challenge will say a lot about his approach to Indo-Pacific strategic challenges, specific nuclear proliferation threats, and the nuclear non-proliferation regime.<sup>15</sup> What kind of submarines Australia will acquire, for example, will almost certainly be clarified during his time in office, if not in March 2023.<sup>16</sup>

In a previous analysis of Australia's foreign policy and strategic orientation to the United States between 1976 and 2016, I identified some important political party-based variation over a period of forty years that included three Liberal and four Labor governments during the Cold War, early post-Cold War, and more recent post-Cold War periods. Labor party governments were only willing to militarily intervene in US wars when these had a supporting United Nations Security Council Resolution. Labor party governments also worked much more frequently towards the formation and consolidation of multilateral political and economic regional institutions. I argued on this basis that while the United States was necessary for the Labor party, in addition to United Nations multilateralism, the United States was sufficient for the Liberal party. I was not able to address variation in the major political parties approaches to nuclear weapons, but had I done so, I would have shown a third pattern. Australian Labor governments have tended to champion nuclear free zones, nuclear disarmament, and global nuclear abolition campaigns, while also quietly enjoying the nuclear umbrella that the US-Australia alliance offers. The Liberals have tended to be a bit less quiet – but still not loud – about the US potential extended deterrence commitment to Australia. They have, however, shown much less interest in nuclear disarmament initiatives. Nonetheless, Australian approaches to nuclear non-proliferation, nuclear safety, nuclear security, nuclear arms control, and nuclear disarmament have most recently exhibited strong bipartisanship, with the notable exception of Labor's more nuanced approach to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW).

AUKUS, therefore, puts the Albanese Labor government in an interesting and potentially challenging situation. One of Albanese's priorities has been to demonstrate that his government would toe just as hard a line against the threats facing Australia, and fight just as well as his liberal predecessors. He therefore joined a QUAD meeting in Tokyo on his first day in office, attended a NATO summit one month later, and shortly thereafter visited war-torn Ukraine. There was perhaps more show than substance in these visits, but the clear signal to allies, partners, and competitors was that his government would exhibit continuity with the Morrison and Turnbull governments on most Australian security challenges. The fact that



Australia's military and non-military contributions to Ukraine are the largest of all non-NATO US allies appears as much about signalling the intent to maintain the US liberal world order as it is about helping Ukraine defend itself from Russian revisionism.

But AUKUS may come to run up against some long-held Labor party values. Most obviously, while Morrison, Albanese, and many Australians are sincere in emphasising that they do not desire nuclear weapons, other governments may not believe them. Some governments may believe them now, but worry about whether Albanese can tie his successors' hands in the future. After all, if Australia could walk away from its deal with the French and sign up to AUKUS as quickly as it did, other states may worry about another, more menacing, Australian about-face. I should emphasise that this is very much a perception problem which exists even if Australian policymakers sincerely do not seek nuclear weapons, as I believe to be the case. Indeed, it is possible that some could perceive in Australia's serious efforts to assure others of its honest and virtuous nuclear non-proliferation credentials a means to distract attention from another nuclear program should the need arise. Most nuclear powers, including those that have extensively sold nuclear materials, have, after all, also engaged in such assurance initiatives.

Australian nuclear-powered submarines may indeed bring nuclear power and maybe nuclear weapons slightly closer to Australia's grasp, and, more likely, may encourage others to go in the same direction which would place more pressure on the NPT. Neither Morrison, Albanese, nor his successor can guarantee that some future Australian Prime Minister won't come to desire nuclear weapons to deal with menacing future threats. The point is not that Morrison or Albanese have any interest at all in a clandestine nuclear program but that their successors might think twice about docking the submarine and extracting the nuclear material. This risk may be more likely if the prospects of a US-China conflict increases, and Australia would prefer to not join a fight, while also striving to not face any threat from China or North Korea without the United States.

Many have realised this risk and sought further assurance from Australia regarding how Canberra will effectively tie its own hands. But the problem remains that whether or not Albanese can find a way to do this, anyone in the region who do not believe he has done so may feel further motivated to go down the nuclear submarine path themselves. The obvious case here is South Korea, which of course faces another set of pressures to develop its own nuclear weapons. AUKUS thus opens Albanese to a spate of nuclear non-proliferation challenges that his party has long opposed. Indeed, when Labor was last in office, China did not pose nearly the threat to Australia that it currently does, and Australia was a key participant in a global nuclear zero campaign to eliminate nuclear weapons. A further challenge is that whatever solution Albanese decides upon to deal with the long fifteen years before Australia acquires its boats may also present its own nuclear proliferation dangers. The Australian leader's approach to these trade-offs will reveal a lot about the extent and nature of the domestic and international audiences and the risks that motivate him.

A decision by South Korea to develop an independent nuclear weapons capability would force the Albanese government to show its colours on the issue of further nuclear weapons proliferation. South Korea is the only country to possess submarine launched

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ballistic missiles but not possess nuclear weapons. While North Korea continues to upgrade its nuclear weapons and delivery systems, South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol looks likely to take a much less conciliatory approach to North Korea than his predecessor. Whether another North Korean nuclear crisis and/or South Korean nuclear acquisition causes Albanese to commence another Labor nuclear disarmament or abolition initiative, reconsider his previous commitment to AUKUS, or some other national security policy, will speak to his government's deeper attitude towards nuclear weapons, nuclear proliferation, and the nuclear non-proliferation regime.

# The future of the nuclear non-proliferation regime

**The impact that a possible US-China conflict could have on the nuclear non-proliferation regime would depend on the specific countries involved in such a conflict and how far it escalates.**

What impact might a nuclear South Korea, AUKUS, and a US-China conflict have on the nuclear non-proliferation regime and Australia's allies and adversaries? It is worth remembering that only North Korea has managed to develop nuclear weapons since the Cold War ended.<sup>17</sup> Despite much concern about proliferation cascades and nuclear tipping points, none have yet to occur. A nuclear South Korea may well raise hitherto unseen pressures on Japan to follow suit given its own relationship with Pyongyang and the troubled one with Seoul. A nuclear South Korea would also place great pressure on the NPT. Either of these two developments would force any Australian government to think long and hard about whether it wants to continue down the path of nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament and its commitments to the NPT and the South Pacific Nuclear Weapons free zone.

The impact that AUKUS will have on the nuclear non-proliferation regime will depend on whether Australia can effectively tie its own hands and/or assure others of its robust nuclear stewardship. This assurance will in turn be influenced not only by the submarines that Canberra eventually acquires, but the evolving geopolitical situation and the status of China's own nuclear weapons and beleaguered nuclear submarines. More immediately, the solution that Australia, the United States, and the UK decide upon for Australia's Collins-class submarines before the nuclear-powered vessels arrive, and how they address the above problems, will also be important. The nature of the industrial base that the United States and the UK help provide, and whether parts of it could be diverted or even assist with the production of nuclear and other weapons systems will also be very important.

The impact that a possible US-China conflict could have on the nuclear non-proliferation regime would depend on the specific countries involved in such a conflict and how far it escalates. Nuclear weapons may become attractive to countries like Australia, given advances in China's missile program which can more credibly threaten US vessels operating near the Chinese coast. China's advances in missiles promise to increase the cost that the United States must incur in any conflict. Chinese advances in missile development also promise to increase the cost that Australia would pay in any fight that Canberra joins. Because not joining such a fight may cause the United States to reassess its own commitment to Australia under the US-Australia alliance, Australian policymakers might also, under these conditions, consider the utility of nuclear weapons to deter any threat from China or North Korea independently of the United States.

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