

March 2014

Undermining disarmament: the Australian way

Summary

1. In October 2013, Australia refused a request by New Zealand to endorse a 125-nation [joint statement](#) at the United Nations highlighting the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons. Australia's specific objection was to a sentence declaring that it is in the interest of humanity that nuclear weapons are never used again, "under any circumstances" – which Australia believed "cut across" its reliance on the use of US nuclear weapons on its behalf.
2. Anticipating criticism from civil society for its decision not to join the New Zealand-led initiative, Australia prepared a [joint statement](#) of its own, which sought to balance humanitarian concerns over nuclear weapons with what it considers the legitimate "security" interest of certain states to possess or otherwise rely on nuclear weapons. Australia's competing statement garnered the support of just 17 nations, most of which subscribe to military doctrines endorsing the use of nuclear weapons in certain circumstances.
3. Australia's reliance on US "extended nuclear deterrence" poses a "dilemma" for Australia (to use the government's term) in relation to its disarmament diplomacy. Although Australia regularly offers in-principle support for the complete elimination of nuclear weapons, it regards the push by many governments for a near-term ban on nuclear weapons as incompatible with its military posture. But as international momentum builds towards negotiations on a ban, Australia will find it increasingly difficult to remain opposed.

See also: "[Australia's opposition to a ban on nuclear weapons](#)", ICAN, August 2013

Background

4. Since 2010 the international discourse on nuclear weapons has focused increasingly on the weapons' catastrophic humanitarian effects. In March 2013, Norway hosted the first-ever inter-governmental [conference](#) to examine these effects, which attracted 128 states, and Mexico hosted a follow-up [conference](#) in February 2014 with 146 states. A third [conference](#) is planned to take place in Austria in the second half of 2014. The international Red Cross

movement and various United Nations agencies have been active in these conferences.

5. A prominent element of the emerging humanitarian-based disarmament discourse is the need for a new [treaty to prohibit nuclear weapons](#) categorically. This would put nuclear weapons in line with other weapons of mass destruction – namely, chemical and biological weapons – which have been clearly prohibited under international conventions. Many nations with defence policies reliant on nuclear weapons, including Australia, Japan and NATO members, have so far resisted the push for such a treaty.
6. To bring humanitarian arguments to the fore of disarmament discussions, a [Group of 16](#) nations – Austria, Chile, Costa Rica, Denmark, the Holy See, Egypt, Indonesia, Ireland, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Nigeria, Norway, the Philippines, South Africa and Switzerland – coordinated joint statements in 2012 and 2013 at Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) meetings and in the First Committee of the UN General Assembly. Australia did not sign any of them.

The joint statements

7. In February 2014, the [International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons](#) (ICAN) obtained a series of Australian diplomatic cables, ministerial submissions, government talking points and emails under freedom of information laws, which showed why Australia had refused to endorse the New Zealand-led statement and why it decided to initiate its own competing statement. The documents are [available here](#), and are referenced throughout this paper.
8. The New Zealand-led statement was modelled on a [statement](#) delivered by South Africa on behalf of 80 states at the NPT meeting in April 2013. Australia's reasons for not endorsing that statement are explained in an ICAN [briefing paper](#) published in August 2013. In short, Australia was worried that the statement's underlying objective was to promote a ban on nuclear weapons, which "rubs up against" Australia's reliance on US nuclear weapons. Australia also had concerns about "the internal dynamics of the [drafting] group, the lack of consultation and the lack of clarity on where the key proponents are taking this" (p. 10).
9. The Group of 16 assigned New Zealand the task of coordinating the joint statement for delivery in the First Committee of the UN General Assembly in October 2013. The group hoped to attract at least the same number of signatories as it had for the South African-led statement earlier in the year. Securing the endorsement of Australia, Japan and the Netherlands – which had stayed away from the South African-led statement – was viewed as a priority for the Group of 16, according to Australian diplomats (p. 5).
10. New Zealand indicated that it would "sympathetically" consider any suggested language put forward by Australia for inclusion in the statement, if it meant gaining Australia's support (p. 7). Language proposed by Brazil and Japan was

incorporated. However, the Group of 16 was clear that there should be no “weakening” of the text. The phrase “it is in the interest of the very survival of humanity that nuclear weapons are never used again, under any circumstances” – which Australia saw as problematic – was “non-negotiable” (p. 8).

11. Canberra-based officials formally requested embassy staff in Beijing, Brasilia, Brussels, Buenos Aires, Cairo, Islamabad, Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, London, Manila, Moscow, Nairobi, New Delhi, Paris, Port Moresby, Pretoria, Rangoon, Seoul, Stockholm, Tehran, Tel Aviv, Vienna and Washington to “engage host governments to seek a clearer picture of their intentions regarding this issue at First Committee” (p. 15). They were particularly keen to know whether Belgium, Canada, Germany, Italy, Poland, South Korea, Sweden and Turkey would join the New Zealand-led statement (p. 26).
12. In a briefing note to Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, officials wrote: “the ‘Group of 16’ ... did not budge on the assertion that nuclear weapons could not be use ‘under any circumstances’ ... This conflicts with Australia’s long-standing position that, as long as we face a nuclear weapons threat, we rely on US nuclear forces to deter nuclear attack on Australia ... For the deterrent to be credible, we cannot rule out the use of nuclear weapons on our behalf as a last resort” (p. 54). Ms Bishop accepted departmental advice that Australia “should not join the New Zealand statement” and instead “we should table our own statement ... and ask other likeminded countries to associate themselves with it” (p. 53).
13. Peter Varghese, the secretary of the Australian foreign ministry, wrote that the humanitarian initiative “runs against our security interests” (p. 80). He argued: “It is precisely because the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons use are so horrendous that deterrence works.” Australian officials believed that the New Zealand-led statement failed to appropriately acknowledge “the security dimensions of the debate”. Moreover, “we believe its authors’ primary intent of advocating for a nuclear weapons convention or ban undermines the pragmatic approach we believe is required for effective nuclear disarmament” (p. 58).

Japan’s ‘anxiety’ and the US backlash:

14. According to Australian diplomats, after two weeks of “intensive consultations on the issue”, the Japanese foreign ministry advised Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida to approve Japan’s support for the New Zealand-led statement (p. 19), which he did after consulting Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. The head of the Australian foreign ministry’s arms control and counter-proliferation branch, Jeff Robinson, wrote to colleagues (p. 6): “In my own discussions with the Japanese ... it is clear that this whole issue has been causing them great anxiety.”
15. Like Australia, Japan subscribes to the notion of “extended nuclear deterrence” as part of its alliance with the United States. On this basis, it chose not to endorse the South African-led statement in April 2013, which (like the

New Zealand-led statement) declared that nuclear weapons should not be used “under any circumstances”. Japan’s failure to sign that statement sparked a major controversy domestically, where public sentiment is strongly against nuclear weapons. The mayor of Nagasaki, Tomihisa Taue, [said](#) that Japan had “betrayed the expectations of the global community”.

16. Following Japan’s announcement that it would sign the New Zealand-led statement, Australian diplomats discussed the matter with senior US State Department officials (p. 29). Email exchanges among Australian diplomats indicate that the United States had reprimanded Japan over its decision. “We’re particularly mindful of the strength of the US’s response to Japan’s approach,” wrote an Australian diplomat in contemplating what course of action Australia might take in relation to the statement.

The P5 are ‘running a mile’:

17. According to one Australian official, the P5 nuclear-weapon states – the United States, Russia, Britain, France and China – “have always believed the humanitarian consequences track is a comprehensive nuclear weapons convention in another shape” (p. 6). “The P5 of course are running a mile from this,” he wrote in an email to colleagues (p. 8). Collectively, the P5 states boycotted the Norway and Mexico conferences on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons, labelling them “a distraction”.
18. Australian officials consulted US officials regularly in relation to the First Committee statements on this topic. “There has [sic] been frequent high-level exchanges going on with the US on this,” wrote one diplomat. “As you can imagine, the US position on this is clear ... the wording ‘under any circumstances’ is of course anathema to them, and they see this as the ‘Trojan horse’ which will undermine the NPT, and provide an alternative and possibly dangerous path to a nuclear weapons convention” (p. 13).

The rival Australian statement:

19. When it became clear to Australia that the Group of 16 would not entertain removing the phrase “under any circumstances”, Australia’s ambassador to the Geneva-based Conference on Disarmament, Peter Woolcott, proposed a competing Australian-led joint statement (p. 15), which would be more or less the same as the New Zealand-led statement, but underscore the “security dimension” of the debate and “not resile from our reliance on US extended nuclear deterrence”. Australia felt that “some elements” of the humanitarian consequences agenda as promoted by the Group of 16 “cut across our ... reliance on US extended nuclear deterrence” (p. 22).
20. Australia took the lead in drafting the rival statement, with input from Canada and the Netherlands, which formed part of an informal drafting committee (p. 56). They consulted the United Kingdom and United States on the draft, who were “favourable to the direction of the text, without being in a position to sign (nor necessarily would we want that to happen)” (p. 56). They also remained in close contact with France (p. 58). Australian diplomats felt that “it

would be a useful catch to get Japan on board”, and saw Norway as a “wildcard”.

21. The first draft of the statement, which was leaked to non-government organisations days before its delivery, said: “Simply banning nuclear weapons will not guarantee their elimination without engaging substantively and constructively those states with nuclear weapons, and recognising both the security and humanitarian dimensions of the nuclear weapons debate.” This sentence – which misrepresented the position of ban proponents, who had never claimed that “simply banning nuclear weapons” would guarantee their elimination – was altered, apparently at the request of Japan. “The Japanese have telephoned me at home several times this evening, basically asking if we would be prepared to make further amendments,” wrote an Australian official (p. 68).
22. Only 17 states were willing to add their names to the Australian-led statement: Belgium, Canada, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Japan (it signed both), Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden and Turkey. Australia’s disarmament ambassador, Peter Woolcott, who delivered the statement, argued defensively that “this has never been a numbers game” (p. 72). However, Gillian Bird, a deputy secretary of the foreign ministry, had advised her subordinates that “we should not proceed unless we have a ‘respectable’ number of supporters” (p. 67).
23. Following the delivery of the statement, Australian diplomats in New York reported to colleagues in Canberra and throughout the world (p. 74): “The Australian statement was a useful opportunity to highlight that no one group of countries owns the narrative, nor the sole concern over the devastation that would arise from the use of nuclear weapons.” They acknowledged that some states would “no doubt” have taken a critical line on the statement, considering it to be “in competition with the New Zealand statement” (p. 74). Australia vigorously denied claims that it had encouraged governments to “unsign” the New Zealand-led statement and instead subscribe to its own (p. 107).

Mexico and beyond

24. Australia was even clearer in its opposition to a ban on nuclear during the Second Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons, hosted by Mexico in February 2014. “Some will seek to use this week’s conference to push for a ban on nuclear weapons,” Foreign Minister Julie Bishop [wrote](#) in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. “Their argument ‘to ban the bomb’ may be emotionally appealing, but the reality is that disarmament cannot be imposed this way.” However, Australia’s true objection to a ban is not that it would be ineffective in advancing disarmament, but rather that it would force Australia to end its reliance on US nuclear weapons as part of its military posture.
25. As international momentum builds for a treaty banning nuclear weapons, Australia’s stance – and that of other nations that believe in the utility and legitimacy of nuclear weapons – will become increasingly untenable. It is

worth recalling that, in the 1990s, Australia resisted efforts to ban landmines, claiming that they were vital to national security. A decade later, it adopted a similar attitude towards a ban on cluster munitions. But ultimately Australia joined both the Mine Ban Treaty and the Convention on Cluster Munitions. We hope that it will stand on the right side of history with respect to a global ban on nuclear weapons – the most destructive weapons of all.

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