

BRIEFING NOTE:

Nuclear-powered submarines, B-52 aircraft and nuclear weapons

March 2023

This document lays out ICAN Australia's position in the lead up to Australia's announcements on the proposed nuclear submarine acquisition in March, 2023.

Key points

- The most effective way for Australia to ensure its nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation credentials is to sign and ratify the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW).
- Australia should not put additional obstacles in the way of joining the TPNW.
- Australia's acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines would undermine the spirit, if not the letter, of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.
- The stationing of any nuclear weapons in Australia is prohibited under the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone (Rarotonga) Treaty.
- Acquiring nuclear-powered submarines would increase tensions within our region and increase the likelihood of Australia being a nuclear target.
- Australia must ensure that any future nuclear-powered submarines, and any B-52 aircraft or other US craft stationed in Australia, will not carry nuclear weapons or be nuclear-capable. We do not believe that a US policy of 'neither confirm nor deny' is useful or acceptable.

Precedent

It is unprecedented for a non-nuclear armed nation to acquire nuclear-powered submarines. Australian acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines will motivate and provide justification for others to do the same, indeed it already is.

Nuclear proliferation risks

UK and US submarines use highly enriched uranium (HEU), to 93-97%, which can be directly used in nuclear weapons.

The deal would require Australia to be the first to exploit a loophole in the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Former Head of Verification at the International Atomic Energy Agency, Tariq Rauf, says:

Australia's acquisition of SSNs [nuclear-powered attack submarines] under AUKUS could well open a Pandora's Box of proliferation with non-nuclear-weapon states such as Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Iran, Japan, Saudi Arabia and South Korea among others also going in for nuclear-powered submarines and keeping nuclear fuel (both

low- and highly-enriched uranium) outside the scope of IAEA safeguards. This would weaken the IAEA safeguards (verification) system already facing challenges from new technologies and open up possibilities of diversion of nuclear material for nuclear weapons.

Australia's acquisition of HEU for use on nuclear-powered submarines would undermine Australia's own efforts to reduce HEU use and stocks and achieve a fissile material cutoff treaty.

Escalating tensions

Regional neighbours, including Malaysia and Indonesia, have indicated their opposition to Australian nuclear submarines. Acquiring nuclear submarines to be part of US war and nuclear conflict planning, particularly directed against China, is highly provocative and escalates tensions among nuclear-armed, and regional, states. Australia should focus on reducing tensions and risks of armed conflict, seeking cooperation with all nations to address urgent shared global challenges.

Legal concerns

The stationing of any nuclear weapons in Australia is prohibited under the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone (Rarotonga) Treaty. Australia must never host another state's nuclear weapons and should end rather than increase its role in assisting possible use or threat of use of nuclear weapons.

Nuclear target

Nuclear-powered submarines would increase the priority of targets in Australia for adversaries, including nuclear-armed ones, of the US, UK and Australia. Such targets could include submarine construction sites and host ports. Attack, as well as accidents, would risk radioactive contamination of Australian host cities. Nuclear submarines and nuclear materials may also become targets for domestic terrorist threats.

Missile concerns

The proposed submarines may be armed with US Tomahawk missiles. There are two problems with this: First, these missiles can carry either conventional or nuclear warheads (dual-use). Even if the missiles on Australian submarines are armed only with conventional warheads, there will always be a level of nuclear ambiguity and risks of misperception, including worst-case planning by adversaries making these submarines a nuclear target. Second, Australia is a member of the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) which aims to limit the development of missiles which have a range beyond 300 kilometres. Tomahawk missiles have a range of 2,400 kilometres and if they are dual-use missiles, would undermine Australia's commitment to the MTCR.

Australia's position on the TPNW

Labor made a pre-election commitment to sign and ratify the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. 107 federal parliamentarians have pledged their commitment to achieving this goal, including the Prime Minister.

Australia attended the first Meeting of States Parties to the TPNW in June 2022 as an observer, and ended its opposition to the treaty by abstaining on a 2022 UN General Assembly resolution supporting it after the previous government voted against it. Steps to sign and ratify the treaty are still pending.

Next steps

Should Australia acquire nuclear-powered submarines, the federal government must ensure that they are non-nuclear weapons capable.

The proposed stationing of B-52 aircraft at RAAF Tindal should exclude nuclear-capable aircraft, given around half the deployed US fleet of B-52s were stripped of their capacity to carry nuclear weapons under the New START treaty.

Australia should reject any presence of nuclear weapons in its territory, including airspace and waters, even if transitory.

Australia's plans and policies should convincingly support and not undermine nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. The government must leave no doubt that nuclear-powered submarines and visiting craft of nuclear-armed allies, now or in the future, could be the thin end of the wedge for nuclear weapons hosting, stationing in, or acquisition by, Australia. The most effective way to do this is for the Australian government to sign and ratify the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. It should add no further obstacles to fulfilling this ALP national policy platform commitment.

Available for media comment:

- Dr Margaret Beavis, ICAN Australia Co-Chair, past president of the Medical Association for Prevention of War, 0401 995 699, mjbeavis@outlook.com.au
- Dr [Muhadi Sugiono](#), Gadjah Mada University, Jakarta, Indonesia, +62 812-3041-9393 / msugiono@ugm.ac.id
- Dr Marianne Hanson, ICAN AUstralia Co-Chair, 0424 331 745 m.hanson@uq.edu.au

Further reading:

- ICAN Australia, [Troubled Waters: Nuclear Submarines, AUKUS and the NPT](#), July, 2022
- International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, [Proposed US/UK nuclear-powered submarines for Australia jeopardise health while escalating an arms race no one can win.](#)

- Tariq Rauf, [Australia's Nuclear-Powered Submarines Will Risk Opening a Pandora's Box of Proliferation.](#)
- Sébastien Phillipe, [The new Australia, UK, and US nuclear submarine announcement: a terrible decision for the nonproliferation regime.](#)