

AUSTRALIA'S ROLE IN PREVENTING NUCLEAR WAR

Keynote Presentation by Professor the Hon Gareth Evans, Former Australian Foreign Minister, to PNND/WFM Webinar, *Australia and the Doomsday Clock: Preventing Nuclear War, in Particular through No First Use Policies*, 7 April 2026

The move in January of the hands of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists Doomsday Clock to 85 seconds to midnight – the closest it has ever been – says it all. Along with global warming and pandemics, the other existential risks to life on this planet as we know it, the risk of nuclear war, whether triggered by deliberate aggressive first use, or – probably more likely – through accident, system error, cyber sabotage, or human error or idiocy, is as great or greater now than it has been since the height of the Cold War.

The sad reality is that while nuclear arms control has never been more necessary, it has never been more difficult to achieve. In all three of its dimensions – risk reduction, non-proliferation and outright elimination – the outlook ranges from desolate to hopeless. The important arms control agreements of the past are dead, dying or on life support. And the recent behaviour of the actors that matter most – the United States, Russia and China – has fed concerns that things can only get worse.

The question for today's discussion is what, if anything, can we in Australia do about this deeply distressing state of affairs. We have to frankly acknowledge that on big global issues there is only so much change that can, realistically, be accomplished by even the most creative and energetic of middle powers, as Australia has periodically been over the decades. Any influence that we wield has to rely on diplomatic persuasion and coalition-building, not on the exercise of raw military or economic might. But we have made significant contributions in the past to nuclear arms control, as well as on other weapons of mass destruction issues, in particular bringing to a conclusion the Chemical Weapons Convention in 1993. And I believe that we can again, even in an environment as dispiriting as the one we now confront.

Our past achievements include the Keating government's initiation in 1996 of the Canberra Commission, the first international blue-ribbon panel – including political, economic, military and environmental leaders and experts from around the world – to argue effectively for global zero, and much quoted in international debate since. There was our lead advocacy role in the ICJ Advisory Opinion case on the legality of nuclear weapons in 1996. There was the crucial role played by Ambassador Richard Butler in securing in 1995 (under the Labor government) the permanent extension of the NPT, and in 1996 (under the Coalition government) the adoption of the CTBT. There was the initiation by the Rudd government in 2007 of the joint Australia–Japan ICNND, which not only made a strong case for an ultimate elimination agenda but mapped a realistic step-by-step risk-reduction path to get there.

There was the co-founding in 2010 of the cross-regional Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Initiative (NPDI) to take forward consensus outcomes of the NPT Review Conference. And Australia has also been among the global leaders in developing, through the IAEA and other

mechanisms, effective safeguards, nuclear security and test monitoring strategies, including concluding in 1997 the world's first IAEA safeguards Additional Protocol.

When it comes to advancing the case for nuclear *disarmament*, probably the best we can do in the present environment is make supportive statements at ministerial and diplomatic level at the UN and elsewhere, spelling out – not looking anxiously over our shoulder at Washington – that whatever deterrent utility nuclear weapons may conceivably have had in the past, the risk of their continued possession by anyone, in today's fragile, multiplayer and increasingly cyber-driven nuclear world, far outweighs any benefit. If that means that we can no longer rely in a crisis on US extended *nuclear* deterrence (as distinct from extended *conventional* deterrence), that simply acknowledges what has always been the case: the US will never contemplate sacrificing San Francisco for Sydney, or Miami for Melbourne.

As to whether we should put our money where our mouth is when it comes to signing the TPNW, some of the concerns which have so far inhibited Australia from doing so have no substance. This treaty does not undermine the NPT, and its non-universality and technical weaknesses are not in themselves showstoppers: we could work from inside to rectify its problems and promote its wider acceptance. But the problem Australia does face is that the treaty quite specifically bans any form of assistance to nuclear-weapons-related activity, and this would make it impossible for us to continue to jointly host, in particular, the US early-warning, intelligence-gathering and targeting facility at Pine Gap, which would in turn be very much a showstopper for the alliance. With Trump's America acting ever more crazily, and treating its allies and partners ever more contemptuously, it is getting harder and harder to argue that the benefits of that alliance outweigh its risks. But tearing it up now would be rather a lot to bite off as the price of joining a treaty with no practical teeth.

When it comes to supporting nuclear *non-proliferation*, the commitment of successive Australian governments to the NPT – and to strengthening its regime in every way possible, including through universal adoption of the Additional Protocol on inspections – has always been clear and unequivocal, and that should obviously continue. There is an argument that the AUKUS nuclear fuel-propelled submarines project is at odds with that. But while I think other arguments for ending this wholly misconceived project are overwhelming (including deliverability, cost-benefit and impact on our sovereign agency), its proliferation potential is not one of them: the new safeguards protocols being painfully negotiated at the IAEA should put at rest such concerns.

On the non-proliferation front, we should also maintain our commitment to CTBT/CTBTO implementation, the stalled Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty negotiation, and the kind of nuclear security measures recommended by the successive Obama-initiated Nuclear Security Summits. We should emphasise in all relevant forums our traditional support for nuclear-weapon-free zones, and lend our weight to the concept of a North-East Asia NWFZ embracing Japan, South Korea and North Korea (and perhaps also Mongolia), with accompanying guarantees from the US, China and Russia – hugely difficult as this will be to implement, recognising that the task for North Korea is no longer non-proliferation but disarmament. What we should *not* do is

respond to potential breakouts from the NPT with the illegal and irresponsible use of military force. To the extent that there remains an Iranian nuclear threat – something about which I have always been sceptical – we have surely learned by now that only cooperative diplomacy of the kind we saw in 2015 can end it, not US or Israeli bombs.

When it comes to supporting nuclear *risk reduction*, our status – for now, anyway – as a close US ally and, as such, one of the “nuclear umbrella” states, should give Australia a significant role. In the Trumpian world we now inhabit, where allies are more likely to be seen as encumbrances rather than assets, there may not be much room left for influence, but that should not stop us trying.

My highest priority, and this brings me squarely to a central theme of this webinar, would be to support the struggling but still growing international movement for the universal adoption of **No First Use** doctrine by all the nuclear-armed states. It should not be a matter of pride for us that when both President Obama and President Biden were attracted to going down this path (or at least to its “sole purpose” functional equivalent), Australia was one of those nervous Asia-Pacific and East European allies who failed to support them. The failure to make progress then should not be seen as the end of the argument. One of the many peculiarities of the Trump administration is that the president seems to have a visceral distaste for nuclear weapons, and it may be that we would be pushing at an open door.

There will always be those who argue that, for any nuclear-armed state and any state believing that its own security depends on a nuclear protector, a credible deterrence posture demands that the credible threat of nuclear first use not be ruled out. But I remain wholly convinced that retaining a first-use option, as most of the nuclear-armed states still do, is extremely, dangerous, both for wider global peace and security and often for those states’ own interests, and that advancing NFU should be Australia’s highest arms control priority.

A nuclear-armed state that keeps a first-strike option runs the risk of an adversary misreading its intentions and, fearing decapitation, launching a pre-emptive strike, precipitating an otherwise wholly avoidable nuclear war. Again, a nuclear-armed state that fears a surprise first-use attack from another which has kept open that option is more likely to put its forces on extreme launch alert, thereby increasing the risk of human or system error or miscalculation causing a launch that precipitates the very catastrophe it is trying to avert.

Moreover, refusing to adopt NFU encourages nuclear proliferation. Vertically, because it incentivises potential adversaries to upgrade their own nuclear forces to deny their opponents a first-use advantage or gain one themselves: thus fostering nuclear arms races, with all the multiplication of risk these necessarily involve. Horizontally, because when a state with any kind of conventional capability insists that it needs nuclear weapons to deter or defeat non-nuclear attacks, it necessarily concedes that right to any other country fearing, or claiming to fear, such attack.

One final Australian initiative I would like to see would be Prime Minister Albanese making a major speech comprehensively drawing together the key threads of the nuclear arms control story – commitment to the goal of a nuclear-weapon-free world, to nuclear non-proliferation and to risk reduction – and explaining how Australia can, realistically, contribute to each objective. He and his government are not given to making big, visionary, conceptual statements but this would be a good opportunity to break out.

It has long been my belief that being and being seen to be a good international citizen – a decent country, committed to “purposes beyond ourselves”, as Hedley Bull would put it – is a national interest in its own right to be pursued, not just as a moral imperative but for its soft power returns, with the same commitment we show to the traditional duo of national interests in security and prosperity. There can be no more obvious way of demonstrating our decency than by making a clear declaration, at the highest political level, of our determination to contribute to ridding the world once and for all of the horror of these most indiscriminately inhumane weapons ever invented, and the only ones posing an existential risk to life on this planet as we know it.