

AUKUS won't undermine Australia's stance against nuclear weapons

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Opinion Piece by the Australian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Senator the Hon Penny Wong

23 January 2023

Today marks 50 years since Australia ratified the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).

The NPT's success in stopping the spread of nuclear weapons has been fundamental to global security over the last five decades.

Over 180 countries, including Australia, have committed not to seek, and to prevent the spread of, nuclear weapons.

And as we face the most challenging strategic circumstances in the post-war period, the NPT remains critical to ensuring this security endures.

Our region has seen the largest military build-up anywhere in the world in that time, with limited transparency and reassurance by some states.

In 2022, North Korea conducted more than 60 ballistic missile launches.

Last August, five Chinese ballistic missiles were reported to have fallen in Japan's exclusive economic zone.

In Europe and across the world, Russia's reckless and desperate threats to unleash nuclear warfare still loom large, while Iran refuses to comply with its non-proliferation obligations.

At the time the Whitlam Government ratified the Treaty, unrestrained great power competition between the United States and the Soviet Union threatened the future of humanity.

It is why Gough was such a powerful advocate for the NPT.

Since joining the NPT, Australia has been an example to the world on non-proliferation and disarmament.

We have promoted the use of nuclear safeguards (measures that ensure a state is meeting its non-proliferation commitments) and we have prevented the spread of other weapons of mass destruction.

We are a leading example for the international community on protecting nuclear material – including through the Additional Protocol to our Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Australia was the first country to bring such a protocol into force. It requires greater verification to ensure that countries that buy our uranium are not using it to make nuclear weapons.

As Foreign Minister, part of my job is to protect and continue the legacy of my predecessor Gareth Evans, who drove Australia's action and advocacy on non-proliferation and disarmament.

Gareth understood that assuring Australia's security required us to look beyond our borders and help others to meet the same high standards to which we hold ourselves.

Australia's ambitious work throughout the region to this day demonstrates our enduring commitment to this goal.

We work with Indonesia, Japan, the Republic of Korea and others to build practical safeguard capabilities through the Asia-Pacific Safeguards Network.

We keep advancing the objectives of the NPT through the twelve nation Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Initiative, established by Australia and Japan.

And in partnership with the Pacific family, we remain steadfastly committed to the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty.

We also welcomed the more recent Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons' (TPNW) coming into force two years ago.

While we still need to ensure the TPNW contains the verification arrangements and achieves the universal support that has underpinned the NPT's success, and that it does not undermine the NPT, we share the TPNW's ambition for a world without nuclear weapons.

The Government attended the TPNW First Meeting of States Parties in Vienna in June 2022 as an observer – a demonstration we are engaging constructively to identify realistic pathways for nuclear disarmament.

Some have tried to argue that our ambition to acquire nuclear-powered submarines under our trilateral AUKUS partnership risks undermining our exemplary non-proliferation credentials.

That assertion misses a crucial fact: the submarines we propose to acquire are nuclear-powered, not nuclear armed.

Australia's proposed nuclear-powered submarines will not carry nuclear weapons.

Naval nuclear propulsion is not prohibited – but is in fact contemplated – by the NPT.

Other countries in the Indo-Pacific have been operating nuclear-powered submarines for decades – this is not a new capability in the region.

All three AUKUS partners have pledged to uphold our legal obligations.

And we understand that acquiring this critical capability comes with a responsibility to strengthen even further the non-proliferation regime.

We will also work in lock-step with partners in our region, as we have done for decades, contributing to regional stability and strategic equilibrium in the Indo-Pacific.

In both our endeavours, to enhance Australia's defence capability, and to support practical action on non-proliferation and disarmament, we seek the same goal – a peaceful, stable and prosperous region.

Our region knows too well the devastating consequences both of nuclear weapons and of conflict. Australia's non-proliferation and disarmament agenda is as relevant for global security now as it was when we ratified the NPT 50 years ago.

The Albanese Government deals with the world as it is, and is committed to taking the practical and meaningful steps necessary to shape it for the better – and we will continue to work for a world free of nuclear weapons.

This article was first published in The Guardian on 23 January 2023

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