Australia as a nuclear target

I can't see any cut of conditions short of a nuclear world war which would cause this [Nurnagah] to become a nuclear target and then no more than half a dozen others in Australia. It is a non-problem. Allen Fairhall, Minister for Defence Press Conference of 23 April 1969

The strategic implications of the US installations are not confined to those discussed in the previous chapter with respect to the global strategic balance; there are also important implications for Australia itself. Most particularly, there is the real possibility of Australia's involvement in a nuclear war in which not just the installations, but also Australia's military bases and facilities, and even cities, might be targets. That the Australian public is generally unaware of this possibility is due principally to the government's complete unwillingness to address the question in public.

This is not to say, however, that there is no recognition of the possibility. Academic discussions of the question have inevitably concluded that the American installations at least are nuclear targets. The possibility is addressed quite explicitly in many official pronouncements. Senior individuals and committees within the Australian defence establishment have frequently conceded the possibility — always, however, in-house documents.

In the academic field, the first systematic analysis of the possibility occurred in 1969, when Robert Cooksey and the author concluded that North West Cape, Pine Gap and possibly Nurnagah would be priority targets for Soviet nuclear attack. In June 1971, a simulated and gaming exercise conducted by academics, Foreign Affairs trained and officers of the Department of Supply and Defence came to the same conclusion. Although such an exercise could not provide any definitive answer on this, it being too dependent upon the scenario initially postulated and subsequently generated, it did suggest that there were many quite feasible situations in which the installations are targets. In July 1974, Professor Healey Bull concluded a conference on the strategic nuclear balance and its implications for Australia with, in the following observation:

"Critic[s] of the policy of accepting these installations have always argued that one could never list some of them as possible Soviet targets in the event of a Soviet-American nuclear war, and may therefore serve to 'draw fire' upon Australia." (Emphasis added.)

More recently, Dr. T. B. Millar has opined that:

Some of the US installations in Australia must be assessed to be targets in a nuclear war.1

Within the Australian defence establishment, consideration of the possibility of the installations 'drawing nuclear fire' goes back at least to the 'Strategic Basis' report of 1966 — the first of the documents of that series to be prepared since 1962 (that is, before the North West Cape and, later, Pine Gap decisions). The 1966 report stated:

In the improbable event of general war, it is unlikely that Australia would be a target of nuclear attack, though the United States communication station at North West Cape would be under threat and might be attacked.

While the question was evidently not considered in the 'Strategic Basis' of 1971, it was addressed in 1973 where the threat to Australia in respect of the US facilities was assessed as a 'remote contingency'. Again, 'only in the highly improbable event of general nuclear exchange would it seem likely that the significant US defence facilities in Australia might be attacked'. Finally, it was reported in 1976 that the possibility of North West Cape being a nuclear target was officially acknowledged by senior Australian defence planners in the preparation of the 'Australian Strategic Analysis and Defence Policy Objectives' of 1976, the document which currently provides the strategic guidance for all Australian defence planning.2

1 Robert Cooksey & Des Bull Priority Target or Russian Aggression? Souvenir Edition The Extraordinary\nCase of Nurnagah The Australia of 1969 ANU, Canberra June 1971 (see a shorter account of this exercise, see Tim Dark 'War Over Australia' Australian 12 June 1973
2 Healey Bull Australia and the Nuclear Problem: Some Con-\ncerning Remarks in Robert O'Neill ed The Strategic Nuclear Balance: An Australian Per-\nsonal ANU, Canberra 1975, 142
Undoubtedly the most forthright statement from a senior Australian defence official on this question is that of R. H. Mathams, the Director of Scientific and Technical Intelligence (DSTI) in JIO in March 1978:

Although the likelihood of strategic nuclear attack against Australia is not great, it is nonetheless finite. We cannot determine the priorities the USSR attaches to targets in Australia, but joint US-Australian facilities would probably rank high. In descending order of probability Australia might suffer nuclear attacks against: US facilities in Australia; Australian defence establishments; industrial complexes and urban centres.

However, American officials are always much less reticent on this question than their Australian counterparts. Perhaps the most categoric statement was made by the author in discussion with a very senior American national security official in November 1978:

If I was a Soviet nuclear targeter, I would not put many but I would certainly put some [missiles] on those [American strategic communications and intelligence installations in Australia] . . . And I have no doubt they have.

To begin with, the strategic implications for Australia of the American installations are not independent of the global strategic developments discussed in the previous chapter. The global strategic situation today is much less stable than it was a decade ago. The attempts by both the US and the USSR to realise the strategic potential of counterforce attacks and of selective and flexible responses has undoubtedly increased the probability of nuclear war. And at least to some extent, along with the increase in the general probability of nuclear war, the probability of Australia’s involvement in such a war is increased.

Moreover, given current developments in strategic weapons technology and in strategic nuclear war doctrines, this is further increased by the presence of the US installations on Australian territory, North West Cape, Pine Gap and Nurrungar are certainly significant enough to be targets in their own right. There are many situations in the taking out of one or more of these would degrade the American strategic capability more than would an actual attack on the strategic forces themselves — and even more situations where some measures to reduce or limit damage from nuclear attack could be achieved.

With regard to situations where the destruction of the installations would disproportionately degrade the American strategic forces, the most obvious is probably the destruction of the communications network for the American PBM submarines. The missile-launching submarines are undoubtedly the least vulnerable leg of the American strategic triad; they also carry the bulk of the US strategic nuclear warheads — more than 5,000 out of some 9,200 warheads. American nuclear submarines in general are quieter and faster than their Soviet counterparts and Soviet hunter-killer submarines are as yet quite inferior to the US nuclear attack submarines protecting the American Polaris fleet. The Soviets could be confident of destroying only a very few of these submarines, even in an all-out search and destroy mission. On the other hand, they could relatively easily immobilise the whole American sea-based force by destroying its communications. At the very least, that would prevent the use of SLEMS against high-priority time-urgent targets, and would allow Soviet missiles to be launched or their bombers to be dispersed while the American submarines were sorting themselves out. Time would also be bought for the evacuation of the cities, thus greatly limiting casualties in the event of an American counter-city response. The destruction of the SLEMS communications system is now taken for granted by American nuclear strategists. For example, T. K. Jones (formerly Senior Technical Adviser to the Department of Defense and a US representative at the SALT talks during 1971-4) and W. Scott Thompson (former Assistant to the Secretary of Defense, 1975-6) have recently stated that:

Although submarines at sea theoretically could endure for a long time, the survival of their communications links is, at best, problematic.

Admiral Kaufman of the US Navy also testified in April 1977 with regard to the American SLEMS system that ‘we have to assume that an attack will be made on our communications facilities’. More directly, in secret testimony declassified in 1975, former Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger said that one of the most likely targets in a limited nuclear counterforce exchange is the VLF naval communications. 

A Soviet Sverf SLBM, launched from a Yankee or Delta class submarine, could be used in a nuclear attack on US installations in Australia.

Space-based systems offer many inherent advantages over ground or air-based systems and, as space technology matures, these systems will undoubtedly play an increasing role in support of US and Soviet military operations. As military dependence on space grows, the loss of key space systems could materially influence the outcome of future conflicts.11

It follows from this that the command and control stations for these space systems are no longer the 'relative sanctuaries' they were in the past.12 More recently, in June 1978, President Carter presented an arms control impact statement to Congress which addressed the argument of whether the development of anti-satellite weapons upset the strategic balance. It was pointed out that satellites were already vulnerable through attacks on their ground stations:

Satellite capability probably would be degraded or negated in a major nuclear attack even in the absence of a dedicated anti-satellite capability in that launch facilities and ground stations would likely be destroyed.13

In addition to these quite particular situations, current strategic nuclear war-fighting doctrines produce other scenarios which involve nuclear attacks on the bases quite regardless of their precise military-strategic functions and missions. One thought of these installations, for example, when Schlesinger talked of the possibility of 'limited nuclear exchanges of remote targets',14 or when he described the 'actual swapping' of those remote targets.15 Moreover, the nature and characteristics of at least some of these installations invite the attention of hostile powers, again not so much for the specific functions they perform, but for some of those Kahn-type scenarios which current US doctrine and plans incorporate — such as exemplary and demonstration attacks, strikes intended to indicate capabilities, resolve, and commitment, or to gain 'redress' and other escalatory measures.

The following examples are illustrative:

*because of their distance from the Soviet Union, an attack on installations in Australia demonstrates a global, accurate ICBM capability;

*because the installations are American, but on Australian soil, they can be struck in certain situations without the political consequences a similar attack on the US would have;

*these installations are expensive and their loss would financially hurt the US but they are not so costly as such huge complexes

11 Report of Secretary of Defense
12 Donald H. Rumsfeld to the Congress on the F.Y. 1978 Budget
13 'Nuclear Target' National Times
14 'Australia and the Schlesinger Doctrine' Australian Financial Review 11 July 1974, 3
15 Time 11 Feb 1974, 30; UT News and World Report 28 Jan 1974, 30
as Canaveral or Vandenberg, to hit which might ‘up the ante’ in a bargaining situation too much.

- These places are military (unlike, say, Canaveral), and hence there is more public justification for destroying them, even though the actual attacks on them may not be deliberate attempts to negate their military worth.
- They are undefended, and hence a strike for (say) exemplary or demonstration purposes is more likely to achieve its intended effect than (say) a strike against a defended bunker base in the US.
- The autonomy of the Australian installations (with their own power sources, computers and other data-processing equipment) makes strikes against them for the collateral damage attractive.
- None of the installations are near populated areas; Pine Gap, for example, is near Alice Springs (population 14,000) and its collateral destruction might be considered a warning to other Australian communities to distance themselves from US military systems.

- None of these scenarios are considered to be probable — or even very likely — but it is suggested that they are real and that the concept of nuclear warfighting introduced by Secretary Schlesinger and continued by his successor increase their likelihood. There are also conceivable relationships between this nuclear warfighting concept, the American defense installations, and the targeting of Australian cities. By harbouring these installations, Australia has taken on the risks of nuclear war, it becomes, in fact, little different from a nuclear power and must expect to be treated as such.

Brian Toohey has suggested that in a very limited Schlesinger ‘swap’ the adversaries might seek to leave the strategic systems intact; hence Australian cities may be singled out for attack before the bases.16 Others have suggested nuclear ‘blackmail’ scenarios wherein an adversary (of the US, not necessarily of Australia) might issue an ultimatum to the Australian government to dismantle the installations or suffer a nuclear attack on an Australian city.17

And, finally, others have developed ‘hostage’ scenarios.18

- A ‘hostage’ situation can actually arise — as it does in the Mason scenario — even without an Australian awareness of involvement in it. As detailed in chapter 16 on the Australian-American intelligence relationship, the US installations have been involved in external military activities several times without the knowledge or consent of the Australian government.

There is, then, no difficulty in constructing strategic scenarios around the American bases in Australia which suggest that they have involved Australia in the nuclear war game to the danger of the citizens of not only RAAF and Alice Springs but possibly also of some of Australia’s major cities.

The position of the Australian defence establishment is to concede in private that the installations might be targets, but to offer arguments to the effect that this is ‘remote’ and ‘improbable’. The arguments are, first, as stated in the 1973 ‘Strategic Basis’, that ‘no power has formally quarrelled the presence of US defence facilities in Australia or requested their removal’. This is a very strange argument. It is not believed that the Soviet Union has requested the removal of any plant or weapons system to which they had particular objection (such as the American sites and facilities based in Turkey in the late 1950s and early 1960s and the bases in Europe and Asia used to support over-flights of the Soviet Union by US spy aircraft in the late 1960s). Certainly, they have never specifically objected to numerous strategic systems both in the United States as well as around the world which the US accepts as being important. With some 8,000 warheads allowed under SALT II, the Soviet Union would exhaust their diplomatic capabilities should they ask for the removal of all the targets that they cover. Moreover, they might not need to alert the US to the specifics of their targeting plans — in any case, Soviet spokesmen have made numerous
example, Alice Springs, to this effect.)

Second, the Australian defence establishment has argued that the Soviets would have higher priority targets than the US installations in Australia. Given some 9,000 Soviet warheads and less than 1,500 US strategic weapons systems (ICBMS, FBMs, submarines, long-range strategic bombers and the Forward Based Systems in Europe), it is very difficult to imagine what some of these other targets might be. The argument can only be made given ignorance about either the disproportionate strategic impact of modern command, control, communications, navigation and intelligence systems, or about the current strategic nuclear war-fighting doctrines of the US and the Soviet Union.

And, third, the Australian defence establishment has argued that the American installations would only be nuclear targets in the event of nuclear war. The issue is too grave to engage in such semantics.

In any case, the strategic documentation prepared by the Australian Defence establishment only considers the possibility of attacks on North West Cape. The US intelligence facilities at Pine Gap and Nurrungar are apparently too sensitive even for the Defence Committee to address this particular aspect of their presence.

There is one other argument that outside observers have sometimes put forward. Some academics, even while conceding that North West Cape, Pine Gap and Nurrungar are targets, believe that these installations support systems which shore up the global strategic nuclear balance and that, therefore, to oppose them on the grounds alone of their danger to Australia is parochial. But whether or not this argument was ever valid, it certainly is obsolete today. For the weight of any balance-sheet of the strategic implications of two bases would be on the side of their being destabilising to the central Soviet-American strategic relationship itself. In any case, whether Australia should allow itself to be a nuclear target on the grounds of stabilising the global balance should be a question for the Australian people to decide.

Conservative governments in the 1960s proceeded on the assumption that the presence of these installations was a positive asset for Australia, because it helped to increase America’s sense of having a stake in Australia, and thus to bind America more closely to us. Their sense that the presence of these installations was valuable in itself to Australia, and did not need any American quid pro quo, was symbolised by the annual rent of one peppercorn charged by the Holt Government for the North West Caps Naval Communications Station.

Hedley Bull, in Robert O’Neill (ed), The Strategic Nuclear Balance: An Australian Perspective Canberra, 1976, 142

The conventional wisdom in Australia with regard to the US installations and Australia’s defence is that Australia, because of its enormous size but limited budgetary resources and population, can only defend itself with the active assistance of the United States, and that the presence of the US facilities on Australia’s soil commits it to such assistance.

There are two associated arguments which need to be considered here — that the American facilities commit the US to the defence of Australia, and that such American commitment is necessary for the defence of Australia.

The argument that the American facilities commit the US to the defence of Australia was made explicit in the relevant passage in the 1971 ‘Strategic Basis’ report:

The ultimate US commitment is not in doubt and US strategic interest in Australia is enhanced by our growing importance to the US for defence and space purposes.

A similar logic underlay Australia’s support for the US South-East Asian commitment in the mid 1960s and, more recently, in Australian proposals for joint naval operations in the Indian Ocean and an increased Australian air and sea activity in that Ocean.

The other side of this argument is that the removal of the US installations, if done at Australia’s insistence, would lead to a US denial of this commitment and, at least effectively, an abrogation of the ANZUS treaty.

The evidence for this latter argument is rather slim. It was hinted at by President Nixon in February 1973, before the new Labor government’s acceptance of the facilities was realized in Washington, but whether it was really seriously considered is rather doubtful. The