Averting a Proliferation Cascade

The U.S.-Australia Alliance and Strategic Deterrence

Read Our Report

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Summary

The Indo-Pacific faces a rapidly deteriorating nuclear environment. Unconstrained by arms control agreements, Chinese, Russian, and North Korean advances test the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence and stoke rising proliferation pressures.

In the "third nuclear age," Australia has a critical role to play in reinforcing the credibility of the U.S. nuclear umbrella and thus reducing incentives for regional nuclear arms proliferation. Working together, the allies can create conditions for future arms control that would further stabilize the Indo-Pacific.

Key Drivers of the Deteriorating Nuclear Environment

Erosion of Arms Control

No successor to New START; China and Russia show little interest in constraints.

Regional Instability

North Korea's expanding capabilities; India–Pakistan-China dynamics; Russia's nuclear signaling in Ukraine.

Nuclear Expansion

China's nuclear arsenal has grown from "the low 200s" in 2020 to "the low 600s" in 2024 and is projected to exceed 1,000 by 2030.

Growing Doubts

Domestic U.S. political shifts and strategic reprioritization raise concerns in Canberra and other capitals in the Indo-Pacific.

Policy Recommendations

Reducing Australian Vulnerability

Strengthened resilience deters nuclear adversaries and ensures that Canberra is seen as meaningfully complementing the U.S. nuclear umbrella. Key measures include: 1) bolstering civil defense by building shelters, stockpiling critical supplies, developing alternative communications, creating a national "war book," etc.; and 2) integrating air and missile defense by accelerating investment in layered missile defenses to protect northern bases and critical infrastructure.

Facilitating U.S. Nuclear Operations

Australia has the capacity and capability to enhance U.S. nuclear command, control, and communications (NC3) and missile warning. Key measures include: 1) developing sovereign space-based missile warning satellites; 2) expanding cooperation at existing joint facilities; and 3) contributing to defense against hypersonic glide vehicles and counter-space threats.

Transitioning from Facilitation to Participation

Australia should evolve from a "deterrence taker" to a "deterrence maker." Key measures include: 1) establishing a formal extended deterrence dialogue with the United States; 2) preparing for naval operations in nuclear environments; 3) supporting U.S. bomber operations from northern Australia; and 4) exploring nuclear-sharing arrangements.

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