

Sydney  
1980.

D. Ball  
A Suitable Price  
of Real Estate:  
American Installations in Australia

## 12 Australia as a nuclear target

I can't see any set of conditions short of a nuclear world war which would cause this [Nurrungar] to become a nuclear target and then no more than half a dozen others in Australia. So I see no problem.  
Allen Fairhall, Minister for Defence  
Press Statement 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 very 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 invariably 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 in-house documents.

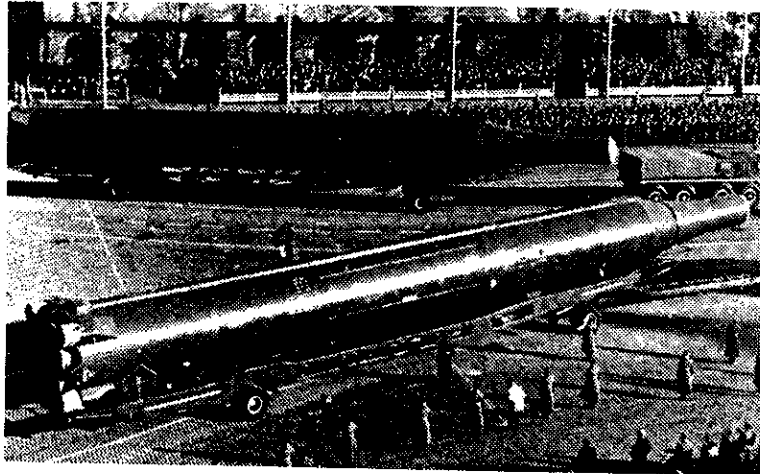
In the academic field, the first systematic analysis of the possibility occurred in 1969, when Robert Cooksey and the author concluded that North West Cape, Pine Gap and possibly Nurrungar would be priority targets for Soviet nuclear attack.<sup>1</sup> In June 1971, a simulation and gaming exercise conducted by academics, Foreign Affairs trainees and officers of the Departments 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 scenarios initially postulated and subsequently generated, it did suggest that there were many quite feasible situations in which the installations are targets.<sup>2</sup> In July 1974, Professor Hedley Bull concluded a conference on the strategic nuclear balance and its implications for Australia with, inter alia, the following observation:

Critics of the policy of accepting these installations have always argued, correctly, that some of them are possible Soviet targets in the event of a Soviet-American nuclear war, and may therefore serve to 'draw fire' upon Australia.<sup>3</sup> (emphasis added)

1 Robert Cooksey & Des Ball 'Priority Target for Russians' Age 3 July 1969

2 Robert Cooksey et al *Simulation and Gaming Exercise: The Berlin Crisis of 1978* ANU, Canberra June 1971. For a journalistic account of that exercise, see Tim Dara 'War Over Australia' *Australian* 12 June 1973

3 Hedley Bull 'Australia and the Nuclear Problem: Some Concluding Remarks' in Robert O'Neill (ed) *The Strategic Nuclear Balance: An Australian Perspective* ANU, Canberra 1975, 142



SS9 Scarp, the longest-range Soviet ICBM, can reach US installations in Australia

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.<sup>4</sup>

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 1968 — 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 1968 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.<sup>5</sup>

Handwritten note: "It is interesting to note that all mentioned in this report would be attacked."

4 T. B. Millar *Australia in Peace and War: External Relations 1788-1977* ANU Press, Canberra 1978, 221

5 Andrew Clark 'Why We Are a Nuclear Target' *National Times* 31 May - 5 June 1976, 1, 25

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 receive nuclear attacks against: US facilities in Australia; Australian defence establishments; industrial complexes and urban centres.<sup>6</sup>

However, American officials are always much less reticent on this question than their Australian counterparts. Perhaps the most categorical statement was made to 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 these [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 which 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



A Soviet Delta class FBM submarine which could be used in a nuclear attack on US installations in Australia

most obvious is probably the destruction of the communications network for the American FBM 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 SLBMs 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 SLBM 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 SLBM system that 'we have to assume that an attack will be made on our communications facilities'.<sup>8</sup> 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

7 T. K. Jones and W. Scott Thompson 'Central War and Civil Defense' *Orbis* (Vol 22, No 3) Fall 1978, 687  
8 Senate Armed Services Committee *Fiscal Year 1978 Authorization for Military Procurement* (Part 10, April 1977), 6734

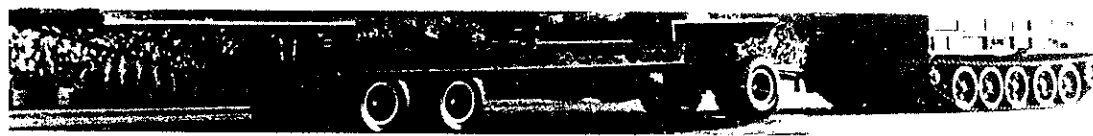


A Soviet Sawfly SLBM, launched from a Yankee or Delta class submarine, could be used in a nuclear attack on US installations in Australia

station at Cutler, Maine. (Secretary Schlesinger made this statement in both direct Congressional testimony as well as in a more considered response subsequently prepared for the Committee.)<sup>9</sup> Instead of Cutler, Maine, Secretary Schlesinger might just as easily have said Jim Creek in Washington or North West Cape, WA, since these three are the key VLF communications stations in the American FBM submarine system. And most recently, in March 1979, a report to Congress of the US General Accounting Office stated that the network of communications facilities was 'not considered survivable during a nuclear war'.<sup>10</sup>

Attacks on navigation and geodetic facilities can also have disproportionate impact in terms of reducing the effectiveness of opposing strategic forces. The lethality of a nuclear force is determined primarily by the accuracy with which it can be delivered — which depends, in turn, on precise knowledge of the launch position (ICBM silo or FBM submarine) and the aim point for the intended target — missile silo, military base, or city. If accuracy is degraded, then many more warheads are needed for a given lethality or level of destruction — or, alternatively, a given number of weapons can do much less damage. Destruction of navigation and geodetic facilities can thus limit damage to Soviet military forces and value targets. Further, if accuracy is sufficiently degraded, some targets could no longer be destroyed at all. In the case of SLBMs, for example, as the elements which provide navigation for the submarines (such as Omega and TRANET) are removed, those missiles lose entirely whatever capacity they would normally have for destroying hardened targets.

There is also great strategic value to be gained from the destruction of the command, control and real-time surveillance facilities of an adversary. This is particularly so in the case of contingencies involving 'controlled responses', especially situations involving limited, sequential nuclear exchanges. At present the United States has a greater capability for these operations than does the USSR, but much of the American capability is dependent upon the maintenance of its military satellite systems. The destruction of these systems would not only remove the US advantage in these contingencies but might even effectively prevent US participation in controlled, sequential exchanges. This was recognised by Donald Rumsfeld, then the US Secretary of Defense, in testimony to Congress on 17 January 1977:



A Soviet Sark submarine launched ballistic missile

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.<sup>11</sup>

It follows from this that the command and control stations for these space systems are no longer the 'relative sanctuary' they were in the past.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

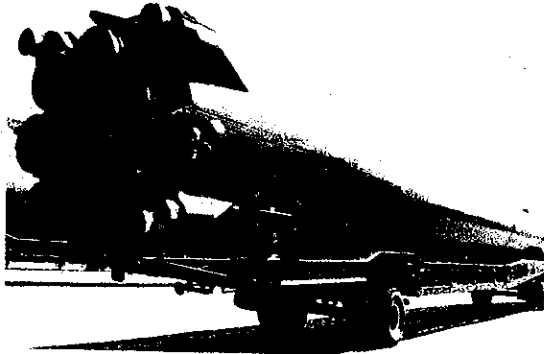
In addition to these quite particular situations, current strategic nuclear war-fighting doctrines produce other scenarios which involve nuclear attacks on the bases quite regardless of their precise military-strategic functions and missions. One thought of these installations, for example, when Schlesinger talked of the possibility of 'limited nuclear exchanges of remote targets',<sup>14</sup> or when he described the 'actual swapping' of those remote targets.<sup>15</sup> 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 Donald H. Rumsfeld to the Congress on the F.Y. 1978 Budget 17 Jan 1977, 137-8  
 12 *ibid*  
 13 'Nuclear Target' *National Times* 23 Sept 1978, 6  
 14 Brian Toohey 'Australia and the Schlesinger Doctrine' *Australian Financial Review* 11 July 1974, 3  
 15 *Time* 11 Feb 1974, 30; *US News and World Report* 28 Jan 1974, 30

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Rear view of the Soviet Scarp ICBM

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 bomber 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;

\* some 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 as a warning to other Australian communities to disengage themselves from US military systems.

\* None of these scenarios is considered to be probable — or even very likely — but it is suggested that they are 'real' and that the concept of nuclear war-fighting introduced by Secretary Schlesinger and consciously retained by his successors increases their likelihood. There are also conceivable relationships between this nuclear war-fighting concept, the American defence installations, and the targeting of Australian cities. By harbouring these installations, Australia has taken on the risks of nuclear war; she 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.<sup>16</sup> Others have suggested nuclear 'blackmail' scenarios where an adversary (of the US, not necessarily of Australia) might

16 Toohey 'Australia and the Schlesinger Doctrine' *Australian Financial Review* 11 July 1974, 3



A Soviet Y class FBM submarine

issue an ultimatum to the Australian government to dismantle the installation(s) or suffer a nuclear attack on an Australian city.<sup>17</sup> And, finally, others have developed 'hostage' scenarios.<sup>18</sup>

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 15 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 Exmouth 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 queried 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 more than a very few specific weapons systems to which they had particular objections (such as the American IRBMs and MRBMs 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 U-2 spy aircraft in the late 1950s). 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 targeted. With some 9,000 warheads allowed under SALT II, the Soviets would exhaust their diplomatic capabilities should they ask for the removal of all the targets that these cover. Moreover, they might not want to alert the US to the specifics of their targeting plans. In any case, Soviet spokesmen have made numerous

no request for removal (Strategic Basis)  
 b/c - duplication of  
 - maintenance of  
 - have been...  
 lower...

17 Robert Cooksey and Des Ball 'Sydney, Pine Gap as Nuclear War Targets' *Sydney Morning Herald* 3 July 1963, 2  
 18 Colin Mason *Hostage* Sun Books, Melbourne 1973

example, Alice Springs, to this effect.)<sup>19</sup>

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, FBM 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',<sup>20</sup> 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 those 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.

## The defence of Australia

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 Cape Naval Communications Station.

Hedley Bull, in Robert O'Neill (ed),  
*The Strategic Nuclear Balance: An Australian Perspective*  
Canberra, 1975, 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.<sup>1</sup>

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

<sup>1</sup> Cited in 'A New Top Secret Basis for a New Defence Policy' *National Times* 25-30 June 1973, 7