



INTERVIEWS

As part of its continuing effort to provide readers with unique perspectives on critical national security issues, National Institute has conducted a series of interviews with key subject matter experts on a variety of contemporary defense and national security topics. In this issue of National Institute's *Journal of Policy & Strategy*, we present two interviews: one with Rod Lyon, Senior Fellow—International Strategy, Australian Strategic Policy Institute; and Dong-hyun Kim, International Broadcast Journalist, *Voice of America*. The authors offer their perspectives on U.S. assurance in a multipolar competition, examine views of the Australian and South Korean governments respectively, and offer recommendations on improving communication with the United States. The interviews were conducted by Michaela Dodge, Research Scholar, National Institute for Public Policy.

An Interview with Rod Lyon Senior Fellow-International Strategy, Australian Strategic Policy Institute

Q. What are the Australian government's views regarding the value of the alliance with the United States? How important is it for the government?

A. Well, I don't speak on behalf of the Australian government, so I should make clear at the outset that the views I give here are merely my own. Still, this first question is easily answered: a steady procession of governments have believed that the alliance is of fundamental importance to Australia. It offers an assurance of support from the United States in times of need, enables a stronger Australian Defence Force through technology transfer, joint exercising and intelligence exchanges, and underpins an annual defence budget of roughly two percent of GDP instead of a much higher figure. In accordance with the dictum that success has many fathers, both Liberal-National and Labor governments claim paternity of the alliance relationship. Moreover, the alliance enjoys strong public support, making governments wary about being seen to damage it.

Still, each government comes to power facing a unique configuration of international and domestic constraints. Today's strategic circumstances are particularly challenging, especially in relation to power shifts in the Indo-Pacific. The strategic conversation in Australia both within and beyond the government turns upon the question of how best to prepare to live in a more unsettled and competitive region. And since governments don't rule by strategic considerations alone, those decisions are shaped by a range of imperatives, including, for example, the wish to maintain a budget surplus. Moreover, the Australian Labor Party is not of one mind upon the critical issue of nuclear weapons, making the government reluctant to lead a public discussion on the issue, lest doing so 'spooks the horses', so to speak.



Q. What is the value of extended nuclear deterrence?

A. This is a harder question, since governments are not inclined to ruminate upon the value of particular strategic concepts. I suspect the government's thinking is still rather traditionalist. The Asia-Pacific was a secondary theater to Europe in U.S. strategic thinking and nuclear weapons were not as important here. That thinking still permeates the Australian view of extended deterrence, complicating thinking about an already esoteric subject. For the reasons given above, the current government has not set forth to lead an informed discussion with the public on the changing shape of nuclear coercion, and what that implies for U.S. allies and partners. Both the Australian government and public need to invest more heavily in thinking about the changing roles of conventional and nuclear weapons in a more multipolar Asia.

Further, the value that the Australian government places upon extended deterrence is not determined solely by importance of the doctrine for Australia itself. The U.S. umbrella provides security against large-scale military attack for dozens of countries worldwide, many of which are more directly exposed to coercion than Australia is. Were the doctrine to fail, it might well precipitate a wave of proliferation that doubled the number of nuclear-armed states in the world.

Q. What is the Australian government's view of the credibility of the U.S. nuclear umbrella?

A. That's a difficult question to answer. Australia enjoys the luxury of a geographical location remote from the region's strategic front lines, and so doesn't feel quite the same strategic pressures that some other countries do. But it's hard to believe that questions about the credibility of the U.S. nuclear umbrella aren't increasingly being raised within government. Moreover, a reading of the previous government's Defence Strategic Update 2020 would suggest that such questions aren't new. The prospect of a second Trump administration adds fuel to the flames.

Q. What are the Australian government's views of the force posture requirements for extended deterrence?

A. There is no special trick that automatically makes extended deterrence more credible. The allies have in recent years explored the force posture requirements needed to diversify U.S. deployment options in the region, including the rotational presence of U.S. marines in the Northern Territories, and improved access for naval and air assets, including as part of the AUKUS agreement. Indeed, over the past decade the force posture initiatives have wrought, unbeknownst to most Australians, a mini-revolution in terms of operationalizing the alliance.

More difficult to distill from publicly-available information is the extent to which the Australian government might be willing to explore increased cooperation in regard to

nuclear weapons. Australian membership of the Treaty of Rarotonga constrains stationing and storage options, but seems to leave some space for weapons deemed to be ‘in transit’. Still, given the worry about spooking horses, it is hard to imagine the current Australian government being especially venturesome in exploring such options. That’s disappointing, as the pace of strategic change in the Indo-Pacific currently provides a rationale—some might even say a requirement—for bolder thinking about the diverse forms that increased nuclear sharing might take.

Q. If Australia’s government has concerns regarding the credibility of the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent, what are the root causes of these concerns and their priority?

A. There are concerns about the duration and prioritization of U.S. engagement in the world, doubts about whether the pivot to Asia really was a pivot, and uncertainty about how much we should expect to change. Ukraine shows important equities in other parts of the world and the pivot to Asia appears remarkably long-time coming.

For some decades, Australian governments have quietly believed that if Australia was attacked the United States would have little choice but to come to the assistance of its ally. Australian membership of the Five Eyes arrangements was thought to strengthen the U.S. treaty assurance to something closer to a guarantee. But those calculations have been the subject of renewed speculation given the uncertainties that a candidate like Donald Trump brings to U.S. policy, which could be chaotic for years.

Q. How does the U.S. extended deterrence need to change given the negative security developments, particularly China’s rise and Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine?

A. In all likelihood the security environment will be worse in 10 years than it is now, and demand for assurance will outrun the supply. As that happens, the United States will need to be aware of overreach and will have to prioritize. That suggests we’re going to be looking at a ‘shake-out’ of current alliances, and a more selective form of U.S. strategic engagement. U.S. extended deterrence will probably evolve to match that new pattern of engagement. It is not just that the United States needs to follow through on its current program of strategic nuclear modernization—although that’s a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for sustaining the credibility of extended nuclear deterrence in the years to come. After all, allies are protected best by a soundly-defended United States.

But the current U.S. nuclear arsenal lacks diversity, particularly on the non-strategic side given that nuclear deterrence seems more likely to break at the regional rather than the intercontinental level. Nowadays, the U.S. non-strategic nuclear arsenal is a mere shadow of what it used to be through much of the Cold War. It would seem to need not only more nuclear warheads, but more kinds of nuclear weapons, and—especially in the Indo-Pacific—more deployment options. The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNIs) of 1991, which removed non-strategic nuclear warheads from surface vessels, attack submarines and naval

aviation, are now acutely felt in a region lacking ground-based deployments in allied countries.

Q. The United States continues to promote arms control policies and to expect that arms control policies can solve security problems. Some of these U.S. arms control endeavors appear to have damaged U.S. capabilities for extended deterrence and assurance (e.g. no-first use policy, retirement of the Tomahawk Land Attack Missile/Nuclear, or PNIs). How does the Australian government think about the tensions between pursuing arms control goals and damage these goals cause to extended deterrence and assurance in the long-term?

A. This is not a subject upon which the Australian government is inclined to speculate publicly. The dominant paradigm is inclined to see arms control as a method of enhancing stability—classically, arms race stability and crisis stability. Nowadays, that includes the danger of a U.S.-China strategic relationship which slips into conflict because of a lack of ‘guard rails’. By contrast, the government is reluctant to venture too closely to any form of endorsement of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), despite pressure from anti-nuclear activists and some of its own back bench.

Q. How does the Australian government communicate its policy preferences to the United States?

A. There is no shortage of meetings between the government, and there is even some belated recognition in Australia that we need more dialogue, particularly on missile defense issues.

When one considers the levels of dialogue, the most valuable is a leader-to-leader dialogue. That one is also the most important because on the nuclear level, the U.S. president is the sole authority for launching nuclear weapons, so other commitments do not have as much value as the president committing to the defense of an alliance with all available means.

The closest one gets to the presidential articulation of a specific U.S. extended nuclear deterrence commitment to Australia is President Richard Nixon’s Guam Doctrine, but that commitment—part of a generic assurance to allies in the Asia-Pacific—is thin and dated. The United States should be clearer in what it is offering for Australia’s defense and what Australia is accepting as a consequence.

Ideally, one would reach an Australian version of the Biden Administration’s Washington Declaration, but that would be very difficult for Australia’s domestic politics.

Below a leader-to-leader level, there is an entire range of government-to-government meetings, but most of this activity—with the notable exception of the annual Australia-United States Ministerial Consultations—has little public profile, and Australians would probably not feel assured if they knew about it. AUKUS, for example, helps to sustain the alliance; but it does so at the price of presenting nuclear propulsion as good, but nuclear weapons as bad.

The third level of contacts are trusted advisors, or people outside the government who know the issues and can effectively communicate them to others. Kim Beazley is an example of a defense and security realist and a good communicator; but his generation is passing, and we haven't identified the replacements.

Q. In your experience, do U.S. government officials interpret such communication in a way the Australian government intends it?

A. Yes, if Australia knows its own mind, and it is not always clear it does; the closer one gets to the core of extended deterrence, the less thinking we have done about it.

Q. What steps could the United States take to improve bilateral communication related to U.S. nuclear weapons and extended deterrence?

A. Australia needs to clarify its own thinking; it needs to do that by growing its own base of nuclear expertise, which it does not have at the moment.

Q. What steps could allied countries practically take to improve bilateral communication related to communicating their assurance requirements to the United States?

A. They could and should take more interest in nuclear strategy and assurance issues. We need to improve the depth and quality of nuclear thinking in Australia and that would go a long way in improving bilateral communication. We need a new generation of talented civilians to fill this gap.

Q. In your experience, which ways of communication did you find most effective in terms of assuring the Australian government?

A. One of the most effective ways to communicate are repeated and reinforcing leader-to-leader exchanges akin to the Washington Declaration. But, as I've said, Australia has to do more to clarify its own thinking. Channels of communication work best when both parties know their own minds and have things to say. In today's environment we need to be comfortable addressing hard topics, such as the growing possibility of nuclear proliferation by advanced, status-quo-supporting states. It is ironic that we can stop proliferators we like, but not the ones we don't like; the risk calculus always works against us.

Q. In your opinion, what would be the best way to promote an informed debate on U.S. nuclear weapons policy in Australia?

A. It would be difficult to do so because the government does not want to stir up a debate on nuclear issues. So there's little interest in an informed debate. Maybe the Australian

Minister for Defence could make a speech on nuclear deterrence, but even that might be too difficult domestically.

The other way to promote debate is to use a U.S. trigger as it were, such as the Strategic Posture Commission report. The key question is how do we follow up in ways that bring the problem back to Australia. Thinking on these important matters is practically non-existent here; there are no deep-thinking nuclear theorists in Australian party government. That's not unreasonable: political leaders tend to be pragmatists concerned with the problems of governance. But a public debate that was not well led would be problematic. The nuclear issue could easily become misrepresented and polarizing among Australia's population, which generally isn't well informed about nuclear issues.

Q. What is the state of the public debate regarding the value of alliance with the United States, the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence, and nuclear disarmament, inter alia.

A. The value of the alliance with the United States is generally accepted and its approval is consistently high in the public polls. Public debate on nuclear issues is under-cooked. If these issues are discussed, they are mostly in the form of rancorous and ill-informed exchanges in which people talk past each other.

Communicating about the threat would perhaps help some, but there is a two-level denialism in the Australian government. One, some deny that China is a threat and two, some deny that nuclear weapons make a useful contribution to deterring a more dominant China. In some ways China was perceived more as a threat back in 2017, when it imposed sanctions against various trade groups, than it is now. Some in the government would say this is how great powers behave and China is a great power so there's a degree of pushiness that we have to tolerate. Focusing on China would not be enough by itself.

The government has yet to internalize just how much has changed. We have great powers behaving coercively with nuclear weapons (Russia, China, North Korea), Iran on a nuclear threshold, and the security environment will be worse ten years down the road.

Ukraine shows a nuclear-armed power acting in an aggressive coercive way, which is more than unsettling, especially if China and Russia cooperate and become Eurasian hegemons. This is partly why nuclear deterrence is more important now than it has been in decades.

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An Interview with Dong-hyun Kim, International Broadcast Journalist *Voice of America*

Q. If the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea) has concerns regarding the credibility of the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent, what are the root causes of these concerns with regard to the South Korea's government's views and their priority?

A. South Korea is always under a nuclear threat and the outcome of negotiations between the United States and North Korea will play an important role in South Korea's perception of its sovereignty and security.

We are concerned because of the mismatch between U.S. nuclear modernization funding and South Korea's threat perceptions, although most South Koreans do not understand the scope of the challenge to U.S. nuclear modernization. In other words, we are concerned whether the United States will have the necessary nuclear capabilities to deter evolving and advancing threats. We perceive negatively that the Biden Administration appears to be giving up the Sea-Launched Cruise Missile.

South Korea is concerned over the U.S. demand for burden-sharing, which became a very salient issue during President Donald Trump's tenure. The South Korean public perceives the United States as its principal ally, and then wonders why it is so stingy since presence of United States Forces Korea is believed to be crucial for U.S. own national security interest whether its geopolitical role serves against North Korea aggression or vis-à-vis a greater competition against the People's Republic of China

Q. If South Korea has concerns regarding the credibility of the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent, what measures could the United States take to help address these concerns?

A. The current government sees less hope for denuclearization for the foreseeable future, and so it now focuses much more on conventional deterrence. Conventional deterrence needs to be strengthened while the United States continues to provide nuclear guarantees.

South Korea is noticing the development of offensive options in the United States (e.g., left of launch) leading to a more aggressive deterrence posture. South Korea is thinking through a much more active defense posture, too. It recognizes the priority to be a rigorous and active defense, including strong signals from the ROK's president about decapitating the DPRK's leadership in the case of a conflict. China and Russia are building hypersonic weapons, which gives us less faith in missile defense.

Q. How does the U.S. extended deterrence need to change given the negative security developments, particularly China's rise and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine?

A. Russia's invasion of Ukraine resonates quite a bit because of the DPRK's help to Russia. South Korea's defense industry-related exports got a boost because of war. While the cooperation between China and Russia is concerning, the priority for us is North Korea. The situation raises concerns over how much attention can the United States spare for North Korea given all the other developments. There is a certain nervousness about U.S. comments regarding two-peer adversaries. The primary threats to U.S. interests are Russia and China, while the DPRK and Iran are considered secondary. This prioritization makes South Korea nervous because there is a limited amount of equipment and an insufficient U.S. modernization budget.

What if China invaded Taiwan? How much would the United States commit to that fight versus saving for a fight with North Korea? Would the United States care less about South Korea in such a hypothetical? The prioritization of U.S. resources is a major concern when it comes to extended deterrence and assurance. Additionally, the credibility of the nuclear umbrella deteriorated during the Trump Administration. This is because the persona of the president is associated with nuclear weapon use, which led to questions whether the president would be willing to trade California for South Korea.

South Korea, the United States, and Japan should address the threat of North Korea, Russia, and China, but their publics do not want to do that if it impacts their economic well-being. South Korea is less concerned about China and Russia, but more focused on North Korea and what would happen to extended deterrence vis-à-vis North Korea if the U.S. focus shifted to Russia and China.

South Korea's geopolitical situation is such that we do not want the current confrontation with China because of the market (China had been our largest trading partner, the United States our second largest trading partner for decades). South Korea is very uncomfortable with threats between China and the United States and worries that South Korea's interests will be neglected in the confrontation. The South Korean government wants to strengthen the Indo-Pacific, but not so much that it would antagonize China, which in turn complicates relations with the United States. To us, it is difficult to see that China would be a worse long-term threat than the DPRK. China's alignment with Russia is complicating the matters further.

Q. What steps could the United States take to improve bilateral communication related to U.S. nuclear weapons and extended deterrence?

A. I think the government officials in South Korea clearly understand the U.S. extended deterrence posture, but the problem is with the general public's understanding.

Q. What steps could allied countries practically take to improve bilateral communication related to communicating their assurance requirements to the United States?

A. Reassurances by U.S. officials are important, so is linking programs and weapon system rationales to their missions in the context of extended deterrence and assurance. The United States ought to communicate with foreign journalists more because information from official news briefings makes its way to foreign press. Logical explanations can boost credibility. The public diplomacy link to the South Korean public is very weak and that is something we should change. We ought to have more articles written by U.S. and South Korea's government officials. Defense companies' press releases can link a weapon system's capabilities to a regional context and ought to be a part of this public diplomacy effort.

U.S. position emphasizes the strength of nuclear umbrella now, but that may not be enough for South Korea as the threat evolves. The South Koreans are told that nuclear sharing is not possible, but U.S. officials do not explain to the public why nuclear sharing is not an option in South Korea. A better explanation of how nuclear sharing works in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is important, because South Koreans do not know that.

Q. In your opinion, what would be the best way to promote an informed debate on U.S. nuclear weapons policy in South Korea?

A. Increasing the visibility of the strategic assets is helpful and significant. We feel safe when the systems are closer rather than further away. This also explains why the notion of having tactical nuclear weapons on South Korea's territory is so popular; we want to feel safe.

Q. What is the state of the public debate regarding the value of alliance with the United States, the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence, and nuclear disarmament, inter alia.

A. There is a difference between the government's and the public's thinking on U.S. extended deterrence. South Korea's presidential candidates discussed problems with extended deterrence during the debates, and the previous unsuccessful candidate spoke in favor of nuclear sharing akin to NATO's. The public's support for an independent nuclear deterrence or the re-deployment option of U.S. nuclear weapons to the Korean Peninsula is very high. The government in Seoul has to reflect how the nation feels.

The support for a nuclear program pre-dates North Korea's nuclear program and goes back to the 1980s and 1990s. It stems from our notions about sovereignty as much as North Korea's evolving threat. The liberals and the conservatives differ on many policy issues, but they understand that the best option is sticking with U.S. deterrence policy and focus on a much more practical approach of increasing engagement between South Korea and the United States. They use the public support for an independent deterrent or U.S. redeployed tactical nuclear weapons as a tool to pressure the U.S. administration to make nuclear assurances more robust.

South Korea and Japan were very seriously against the no-first use (NFU) policy. Japan was very vocal in terms of trying to stop the Biden administration from including that policy in the *Nuclear Posture Review*. How realistic the NFU policy is would require a more robust public discussion.