

# AUSTRALIA'S URANIUM SALES FUELLED THE FUKUSHIMA DISASTER AND NOW FUEL GLOBAL INSECURITY

*Briefing Paper prepared by David Noonan, February 2021*

Australian uranium results in unresolved global nuclear waste piles, [fuelled the Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011](#), and is sold to nuclear weapon states that fail their [Non-Proliferation Treaty \(NPT\) disarmament obligations](#).

Australia has signed up [to sell uranium into insecure regions](#): to India that is outside of the NPT and in nuclear tensions with Pakistan; to Ukraine under insurgency and border instability from Russia; and to the United Arab Emirates – targets in war or terrorism, after Saudi Arabia (armed by the US) could not prevent [drone attacks on Saudi energy facilities](#).

Australia has no leverage through our uranium sales and should reverse these risky atomic exposures.

In 2014, [Australia banned uranium sales to Russia](#), with then Prime Minister Tony Abbott stating: "Australia has no intention of selling uranium to a country which is so obviously in breach of international law as Russia currently is."

Public interest reasons warrant action to [disqualify China as a recipient of Australian uranium sales](#).

'Trust' in China has proven to be misplaced. China is increasingly not accountable to Australia across a widening range of transparency, coercive trade, [human rights abuses](#) and strategic issues.

China's ongoing [human rights abuses in Tibet](#) and against Uyghurs [in Xinjiang](#), with mass detention and [forced labour](#), are severe breaches of international humanitarian law and UN Treaties.

Australia must respond. A case against uranium sales to China is before a federal [China Forced Labour](#) Inquiry (see Submission [No. 02](#) on human rights abuses and [No. 02.1](#) on security risks).

China proliferated nuclear weapons know-how to [Pakistan](#), targets Australia in [cyber-attacks](#), and is causing regional [insecurity on the India border](#), in [Hong Kong](#) and [Taiwan](#), and [in the Pacific](#).

China is [modernising its nuclear arsenal](#) and could attack the [Pine Gap](#) US base in a major conflict.

The [Nautilus Institute for Stability and Security](#) has referenced key understandings that Australia is a nuclear target in war. The Institute's 2013 report, '[Possibilities and effects of a nuclear missile attack on Pine Gap](#)', stated: "Pine Gap ... remains a likely priority target for a Chinese missile strike in the event of a major China – United States conflict"

Mining companies' commercial interests in uranium sales run counter to our public interests and responsibilities. Australian uranium sales, and any claimed influence, are in long-term decline.

Uranium output is in decline from a peak of 10,000 tonnes per year in 2008-09 to a [Department of Industry](#) forecast of only 5,800 tonnes in 2021-22 (p.91-95), the second lowest level of uranium exports in [ASNO Annual Reports](#) since 1998-99. The lowest was 5,515 tonnes in 2014-15.

Uranium export values are in decline from a single year peak of \$1 bn in 2008-09 to a forecast of only \$547 million in 2021-22, the equal lowest Australian uranium sales value in over 20 years, tying with the 2005-06 low. This is due to decline in both mine output and in uranium prices.

Further, uranium exploration "remains low due to ongoing weak prices" ([Dept. of Industry](#), p.94), with only \$1.8 million spent on uranium exploration in Australia in the September quarter of 2020, a near record low.

Australian uranium exports now represent only 8.9% of world uranium usage ([ASNO Annual Report 2019-20](#), p.23). The Department estimates a further 10% fall in uranium output in 2021 and in 2022.

Closure of Rio Tinto's Ranger uranium mine in the NT in January 2021 leaves only two active uranium mines in Australia: BHP's [Olympic Dam copper-uranium mine](#) and the General Atomics 'Beverley Four Mile' operation - both in SA. New uranium mines are uneconomic in Australia.

BHP Olympic Dam is the only outfit still selling Australian uranium into China. There is a case for 'The big Australian' BHP [to forego uranium sales](#) overall and an [onus to end marginal sales to China](#).

In 2006, the Australian Safeguards and Non-Proliferation Office (ASNO) [projected](#) the value of Australian uranium sales to China to be "in excess of 2,500 tonnes of uranium a year" in 2020, valued at approx. \$250 million per annum ([JSCT Report No.81](#), Dec. 2006). Actual uranium sales to China are reported by the [World Nuclear Association](#) to be about 500 tonnes per year, giving an export value in 2020 of approx. \$50 million.

In 2020, Australia's uranium sales to China were only one-twentieth the \$1 bn value of our wine exports to China and only one-seventieth the [\\$3.47 bn record value of SA's exports to China](#).

BHP had to accept an end to Australian uranium sales to Russia and must now act to put a stop to uranium sales to authoritarian China over its severe human rights abuses and insecurity.

Australia must act to lessen nuclear risks by winding back our uranium sales. BHP Olympic Dam uranium sales [fuelled the Fukushima nuclear disaster](#) in 2011. Never again.



*Naoto Kan, Japanese Prime Minister at the time of the Fukushima disaster, pictured with Mirarr Senior Traditional Owner Yvonne Margarula who said she was "deeply saddened" that uranium from the Ranger mine was exported to Japanese nuclear power companies including TEPCO. BHP also sold uranium to TEPCO to fuel the Fukushima reactors. (Photo: [Gundjeihmi Aboriginal Corporation](#))*

For further information on BHP's Olympic Dam mine: see <https://nuclear.foe.org.au/olympic-dam/>