

# China's strategy, Australia's autonomy

A long-time U.S. ally, Canberra has, through the latest uranium deal with Beijing, signalled its own set of priorities.

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**P**OLITICAL AND not just economic diplomacy fashioned China's early-April agreement with Australia to buy its uranium for nuclear power generation. Revealing indeed was the triumph of not only China's strategy but also Australia's autonomy as regards the United States.

In March, the U.S. launched a political-level forum for dialogue with Australia and Japan in a bid to checkmate China in the Asia Pacific arena. On April 3, however, Australian Prime Minister John Howard and his Chinese counterpart Wen Jiabao oversaw the signing in Canberra of a bilateral nuclear energy deal.

The political message could not have been more vivid in exposing the limitations of U.S. influence over Australia. Equally obvious was Beijing's skill in navigating the shoals of the new U.S. security doctrine that placed China at the centre of Washington's likely calculations.

Under the uranium accord, China will get supplies of this nuclear material from Australia over time. It is a straight deal between two members of the Nuclear Suppliers' Group (NSG). But, in accordance with the NSG practices, and more importantly Canberra's "evangelical" non-proliferation concerns, China has now signed a "safeguards" agreement with Australia to translate their uranium deal into reality.

Under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), China is one of five designated states in rightful possession of atomic weapons.

So, it is a measure of the pressure on Beijing from the NPT high-priest, the U.S., that Mr. Wen should have felt compelled to defend the uranium deal on political grounds.

At the post-accord press conference, he cited China's adherence to the NPT and membership of the International Atomic Energy Agency as confidence-building aspects of his country's likely behaviour under its new and peaceful nuclear pact with Australia. Mr. Howard said he was "satisfied that the safeguards that are there will be enforced."

## Strategic realities

For the non-proliferation vigilantes, the political bottom line is China's pledge to refrain from using Australian uranium for "non-peaceful purposes" of making nuclear weapons. However, the relevant strategic realities pertain to the emerging cross-currents within the U.S.-led camp in the Asia Pacific theatre.

As a long-time U.S. ally and as a Western outpost in the Asian neighbourhood, Australia shares Washington's desire to sustain and enhance its current supremacy across the world. This explains why Australia has allowed itself to be drafted by the U.S., as

recently as last month, into a political-level forum that includes just one other partner, Japan.

Nevertheless, Australia has, through the latest uranium agreements, signalled its autonomous set of priorities. Begun early last year, the negotiations with China have concluded very quickly. For now, Canberra has not acceded, though, to Beijing's parallel bid to secure rights to mine uranium in Australia, where nearly 40 per cent of the global reserves of this nuclear material are found.

China's critics argue that its interest in such mining rights might reflect a desire to gain strategic access to Australia. A Chinese objective, in this scenario, is the possible ability to monitor the activities along the adjacent Indian Ocean, a U.S. naval play-ground. Maritime means and space-platforms are already available to China for keeping an eye on U.S. activities across the Indian Ocean.

Australia may have gone by its proliferation "concerns", and also acted in a U.S.-friendly manner in denying China permission to mine the reserves of a sensitive nuclear material at this stage. However, Canberra's uranium-sales deal with Beijing, which the U.S. could not have prevented even if it wanted, gives it something to think about.

For Washington, a prime priority at present is to ensure that Australia and South Korea do not go off their independent orbits

around the United States.

Japan is almost alone, among all U.S. allies on the Asia Pacific scene, in firmly backing the leader. And, South Korea's growing disenchantment with the U.S. is far more complicated than Washington's emerging challenges of dealing with Australia over the centrality of China.

## Charm offensive

Beijing's own charm offensives apart, Australia is beginning to treat China as an "offstage superpower" in the way that historian Paul Kennedy saw the U.S. and also the Soviet Union of the period between the two World Wars. Mr. Howard's comments during Mr. Wen's latest visit to Canberra tell this story.

Mr. Howard said Australians "do not see any merit at all in any policy of containment towards China." In fact, "the strength and the depth" of Canberra's alliance with Washington would "in no way affect the capacity of Australia to interact with and form a close and lasting partnership and friendship with China."

Democracy and human rights in China are Australia's "concerns." But, Mr. Howard noted, "it remains our very strong exhortation to all concerned that we should maintain the lowest possible temperatures in relation to matters across the Taiwan Strait." Australia is eager to please China on the litmus test of ties with it.

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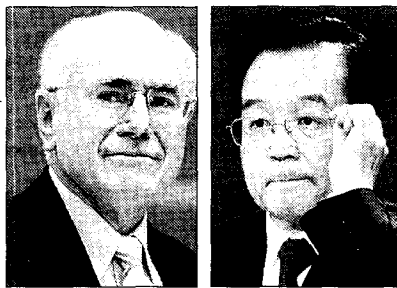
# Australia close to clinching N-deal with China: Howard

**Canberra:** Australia is close to signing a landmark deal to sell uranium to China, Prime Minister John Howard said on Tuesday, just days before Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao was due to visit Canberra.

"We're making good progress. It's possible that the discussions could be satisfactorily concluded so that something could be said or signed when the Chinese premier visits Australia next week," Howard said at a press conference in Canberra. "It's possible. I don't want to say that will happen, but it is quite possible."

Canberra and Beijing have for months been negotiating for China to buy uranium from Australia, which has 40% of the world's known uranium deposits. Howard's comments echo those made on Monday by a Chinese Foreign Ministry official at a briefing on Wen's visit.

Liu Lieyi, director-general of the ministry's Department of American and Oceanian Affairs, said agreements expected to be signed include a general pact on "peaceful use of nuclear energy" and a more specific deal on the "exploration and exploitation of uranium."



**Howard and Jiabao will sign the pact during the latter's visit**

"During Premier Wen's visit, it is likely these two documents will be signed," Liu said at a news conference. Liu Lieyi did not give any details of the proposed agreements.

Wen will be in Australia April 1-4 during an eight-day trip that also will take him to Fiji for a conference with Pacific island nations on April 5. He also goes to New Zealand for two days and stops in Cambodia.

Asked whether a deal with China would be followed by a similar pact with India, following Delhi's recent nuclear agreement with Washington, Howard said the two countries were

very different.

"We are negotiating of course on the basis that China is a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and in that respect China is different to India," he said.

Earlier this month, US President George W Bush and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh agreed on a plan allowing America to share civilian nuclear technology with India, despite Delhi's refusal to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

"We are not contemplating ... a policy change in relation to India," the Australian PM said.

He said a delegation of Australian officials would travel to New Delhi and Washington in coming weeks to discuss the deal.

"We think the American agreement with the Indians is good because it's going to put India's domestic nuclear capacity under international inspections and that is a huge step forward," Howard said, "and whilst India is not a signatory to the treaty ... her behaviour since exploding a device in 1974 has been impeccable and I think that is something people have to bear in mind." AP

# Australia ban on uranium sales to stay

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**SYDNEY:** Australia will maintain its ban on uranium exports to India and other countries that have not signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said on Sunday.

## New Delhi's hopes dashed

His comments dashed hopes in New Delhi that the stance could be softened.

Mr. Downer said he would not change Australia's 30-year-old policy of not exporting uranium to treaty non-signatories.

"There's no basis at this stage for us changing that policy now," he told ABC Television.

"We don't have any intention at this stage to change our policy in relation to uranium exports to those three countries, which are India, Pakistan and Israel, that haven't signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty", he added.

India's request to buy uranium from Australia, which has almost half the world's known resources, followed a landmark deal between India and the United States on civil nuclear energy.

Australian Prime Minister John Howard, during his own visit to India last week, made positive noises about the U.S. agreement and left officials upbeat on the prospect of expanding a nuclear energy industry which accounts for just three per cent of output.

Mr. Downer said he was still keen to see the finer details of the U.S.-India nuclear deal.

## On Milosevic's death

Mr. Downer said it was a pity that the former Serb President, Slobodan Milosevic, died before he could be judged at a war crimes tribunal.

"It's a pity the trial never came to its conclusion," Downer told the Australian Broadcasting Corp.

"This was a man who was an evil man, he was a wicked man. His death means that he doesn't complete the path of justice and, in that sense, it's unfortunate."

— Reuters, AFP

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## Australia no to uranium sale

NEW DELHI, March 6. — Australia will not be selling uranium to India in the near future. But a door has been opened slightly, with the two countries agreeing to a dialogue between officials to discuss the implications of the US nuclear deal.

The Australian Prime Minister, Mr John Howard, told reporters at Hyderabad House today that his government had no intention of changing policy, which bars sales of uranium to non-NPT country. *Ans & Mr Singh*

Interestingly, Mr Howard did not repeat his assertion in Australia before the start of the trip that a sale to India could go ahead if it were convinced of India's commitment to follow global nuclear safeguards on its civilian nuclear reactors. But at the joint press interaction today, Mr Howard, while welcoming the Indo-US agreement on nuclear agreement pointed out that it does not "impact" on Australian policy as it was a bilateral accord between two other nations. Dr Singh earlier made a request for uranium from Australia, which has 40 per cent of world deposits. — SNS

**India seeks more Aussie investment, page 9**