

RA: Fallout Over Nuclear Deals

The attached by-lined article by Robert Amsterdam was published in today's Herald Sun, one of Australia's leading newspapers.



Fallout Over Nuclear Deals

By Robert Amsterdam

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MOST Australians know their country has some 40 per cent of the world's uranium reserves.

Far fewer realise the Howard Government is about to sign a deal with the Kremlin for the export and sale of uranium to Russia.

Prime Minister John Howard has already announced that a deal has been sealed with India to sell uranium under what he describes as "strict conditions" to ensure it will not be used for weapons.

This has brought an immediate response from Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd, who says he will scrap the deal if Labor wins at the coming federal election.

The Labor leader says he is concerned about sales to India because the Indian Government is not a signatory to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Howard reached in-principle agreement last week with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

But Rudd is concerned that safeguards to stop Australia's uranium being used by India's military industry may not be sufficient.

India's chief scientific adviser has already been quoted as saying that India, not the international community, will decide which reactors are to be open to inspection.

These concerns have caused Rudd to turn against the deal.

All Australians should be concerned about advanced talks to sell uranium to Russia.

Simply put, the Kremlin cannot be trusted.

Vladimir Putin was elected in 2000 and during his first term there were some encouraging signs that Russia was on the path to better government and a law-based market economy.

But by 2003, a powerful group of former intelligence and military strongmen had succeeded in taking control of Putin's Kremlin power base.

Democratic pluralists and market economists were pushed out or marginalised. Political opposition was crushed.

Most major news media were bought out. The country's energy resources were brought under Kremlin control.

Today, rich Kremlin insiders run Russia ruthlessly and control its foreign policy with a firm hand.

Neighbours are bullied and long-time business partners are extorted. Opponents are jailed, such as former Yukos oil company boss Mikhail Khodorkovsky, or killed.

A belief has taken root that Russia is entitled to assert itself aggressively and above the law if need be.

Today's Kremlin disregards laws with impunity and uses legal prettexts and tears up business deals at will, even huge investment agreements with foreign companies that have poured billions of dollars into Russia.

These companies are put in a legal or taxation chokehold until they surrender whatever it is the Kremlin is after.

Their CEOs will then put on a brave face and tell shareholders they have rescued a few billion dollars worth of assets when the state has taken billions more.

No one is above the extortion tactics of the Kremlin and its selective application and misapplication of laws.

The Shell company was accused of environmental violations at its \$20 billion Sakhalin oil and gas project. The Kremlin took control of the project and concern over the alleged environmental breaches evaporated.

This is the same regime that imprisoned a journalist, Grigory Pasko, for revealing that Russia had illegally been dumping nuclear waste in the Pacific Ocean.

On the international stage, Russia has asserted itself as a force to be reckoned with.

Gas and oil pipelines to neighbouring countries are shut off at will.

Others suffer trade embargoes.

When the United States and Europe wished to defend themselves against the possibility of rogue missiles from Asia, President Putin threatened to point Russian nuclear missiles at London, Paris and Berlin.

Moscow sells nuclear technology to Iran and has agreed to build a nuclear research centre in Burma.

How comfortable does the Australian Government really feel about a uranium deal with Russia?

In June, John Carlson, the head of the Australian Safeguards and Non-Proliferation Office, suggested the bilateral treaty with Russia could be finalised by next month.

"The timetable is very tight, but I believe we can do it," he said.

Opposition environment spokesman Peter Garrett says Australia "needs to know what discussions and commitments were given to Russian officials or to any other countries concerning Australia being used as a dumping ground for the world's nuclear waste".

When negotiating the Russia-Australia Nuclear Safeguards Agreement, the Howard Government must consider the Kremlin's track record.

Australia should be very careful not to rush into a deal without rigorous rules and safeguards relating to the use and enrichment of uranium and the development of nuclear technologies.

I certainly do not advocate not doing business with Russia.

On the contrary, I believe that increased commercial ties with the rest of the world, on proper terms and solid ground, can be a great positive force for Russia.

Vladimir Putin will be in Sydney on September 8 and 9 for the APEC economic leaders meeting with Mr Howard and other world leaders.

Mr Howard should resist the temptation to accept any attempted whitewash the Kremlin will try to put on its actions.

On the contrary, he bears a heavy responsibility to speak openly with the Russian President about the concerns Australians already have about a uranium deal with Russia.

Much of the world wants to get its hands on Australia's uranium.

But Australia must ensure its uranium does not end up in the wrong hands.

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