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The dangers of nuclear power in the age of terror

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IT'S FRIGHTENING to know that a group linked to terrorism stole seven rocket-launchers from the Australian Defence Force and may have targeted Sydney's Lucas Heights research nuclear reactor. Strangely, the terror threat has not weighed in on the Prime Minister John Howard's push for Australian nuclear energy, even though each new reactor would be 100 times the size of Lucas Heights.

Reactors would be the ultimate high-impact terror target, whose destruction would lead to fatalities and large-scale permanent evacuations due to radioactive fallout. So can the Howard support building a fleet of nuclear power reactors in Australia and still be strong on terrorism?

The internet age has given terrorists untamed access to plan and target civilian facilities. I lazily opened up the Google Earth program and searched for Indian Point Energy Center, which is a huge nuclear reactor complex 32 kilometres north of New York City in the United States. At the click of a button a very clear visual photo was shown with the reactor domes in crystal clear view. Twenty million people live within 80km of this facility.

According to flight paths, American Airlines Flight 11 flew almost directly over the Indian Point nuclear reactor from Boston airport en route to crashing into the north tower of the World Trade Centre on September 11, 2001.

More horrifying was that Mohammed Atta, who piloted the plane, had "considered targeting a nuclear facility," as did Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, mastermind of the attacks, according to the US government's 9/11 commission report. A study in 2004 by the Union of Concerned Scientists found up to half a million people would have been killed if terrorists had decided to target this facility instead of the World Trade Centre or Pentagon.

The Prime Minister's nuclear energy review, published late last year, skims over the terrorist threat for Australian reactors, stating that the designs of nuclear reactors are specially strengthened against any unauthorised intervention and physical protection measures have been demonstrated to be effective. In contrast, the British Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology in 2004 found that new nuclear reactors planned to be built across Europe are not designed to withstand a 9/11-style aircraft attack by terrorists. The same report estimated that a 9/11-style terrorist attack on the Sellafield B reactor in the English county of Cumbria would release 100 times the radioactivity of the 1986 Chernobyl accident and cause at worst "several million fatalities".

In Finland, the government narrowly approved the construction of Western Europe's first nuclear reactor since 1991, in part because Finland has a low terrorist threat level. In backing the decision, a government MP, Mikko Elo, highlighted the lack of concern. "We don't regard terrorism as such a big risk in Finland. I know it is a big fear in London, but it isn't the same in Finland," he said.

With bombings in Bali and the Australian embassy in Jakarta, along with being a strong supporter of the US-led Iraq War, Australia has and will continue to be a target for extremists. On top of the current concerns over the potential use of stolen rocket-launchers, Sydney's Lucas Heights reactor was the known target of a terrorist attack in 2005, before police apprehended the perpetrators.

Couldn't we site the reactors in the middle of nowhere to limit the magnitude of a terrorist attack? Nuclear reactors use massive amounts of water to produce electricity. A parliamentary research note last month estimated that each reactor requires access to nearly 1 trillion litres of water each year. This vast water use makes it a near certainty for reactors to be built on Australia's coastline with ocean access. There is no way to effectively isolate 25 nuclear reactors simply because 86 per cent of the population lives near the coastline.

The methodical planning, execution and impact of the September 11 terrorist attacks has thrown unrealistic terror threats into very real threats. Howard has said Australia would be "foolish" not to consider using nuclear energy, particularly in response to our greenhouse gas dilemma. However, we can address climate change in the electricity sector with natural gas and renewables that don't come with the same terrorist risk as nuclear reactors. Given these less risky options, it will be interesting to see how Howard will try to convince Australians in the lead up to next year's election that building 25 nuclear reactors is good anti-terrorism policy.

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