CHAPTER 2
Almost Oblivious to END, 1945–1957

From the late 1940s to the early 1970s, many senior officials in Canberra made serious attempts to acquire and then develop an Australian nuclear weapons capability. However, for more than a decade, Australian thinking about nuclear weapons and strategy remained inchoate. Extended nuclear deterrence (END) as a concept in Australian strategic policy did not yet exist. Canberra was focused almost entirely on British defense policy, and any thinking about the role of nuclear weapons revolved around their tactical use in a war-fighting context, not their strategic utility as instruments of deterrence. Policy-makers first thought about the bomb in purely literal terms: how such weapons could be used against communist forces in Southeast Asia and to destroy forces attempting to invade Australia. There was no discussion of concepts that would guide the use of these weapons. This chapter identifies and examines the prevailing attitude of policy-makers, and how that view was shaped by the geopolitical circumstances at the time. It argues that Australian thinking about nuclear weapons developed primarily through the framework of thinking about Canberra’s strategic ties to Britain, and the idea of being a responsible contributor to the notion of “Empire defense.” Indeed, although Australia was aligned with the United States under the ANZUS Treaty, policy-makers did not think of it as a “nuclear” alliance until around 1956. It was only then that the concept of END began to emerge; that the United States should deter aggression with nuclear weapons on Australia’s behalf.

An Unstable Asian Strategic Environment
Australia has always seen its interests being preserved by a stable balance in the distribution of power in the wider Asia-Pacific region. Australia’s interest in a nuclear capability was a symptom of what we might term “nuclear disorder.”
There was the threat of massive, conventional interstate war. Australia faced the prospect of complete strategic isolation brought about by British military withdrawal. Nuclear weapons were perceived as usable instruments of warfare. They were also a remedy for insufficient conventional capabilities, and there were beliefs that they would become a normal feature of the region. It was still the era of massive conventional conflict. Two devastating World Wars involving Australian forces had erupted in the space of just 40 years. One needs to take into account the mentality of the era; the prospect of major-power war was considered very real and likely. The generations born since the 1970s have lived in relative peace. Peace was not taken for granted after World War II; the outbreak of another major war (this time involving the use of nuclear weapons) was considered a very real and distinct possibility. In addition, Australia had suffered a major attack from the Japanese in Darwin, and the threat of territorial conquest by an Asian power was still prominent. In spite of John Curtin’s statement in December 1941 that Australia should now turn to the United States, many prominent policy-makers still wanted to maintain a strong level of defense cooperation with Britain; the mentality of Empire defense was still very strong, and continued to provide the basis for Australian defense planning. Also, nuclear weapons were seen by many in the defense establishment as merely bigger and better conventional weapons, and there were no widely accepted norms as we have today against the use, and indeed the possession, of nuclear weapons. Finally, the idea of either London or Washington “extending nuclear deterrence” was still a concept in the making, and it was not until the late 1950s that nuclear deterrence really became something policy-makers specifically and exclusively associated with the American alliance.

In addition, the hostile and aggressive foreign policies of both China and Indonesia were generating considerable unrest in both mainland and maritime Southeast Asia. They also presented a significant military challenge to British military presence in the region—Australia’s primary defense partner. Both Beijing and Jakarta were trying to establish some sort of regional hegemony, which would erode Western influence and create a situation whereby Australia’s security would be shaped increasingly by Asian powers. To make matters worse, London was becoming increasingly focused on possible military operations against the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in Europe. The implication of gradual British withdrawal from theaters “east of Suez” was the regionalization of Empire defense. What this meant in practice was that Commonwealth countries would have to commit greater financial and military resources to ensuring their own territorial defense.