

SafeGround

SafeGround's core business is to end the suffering caused by indiscriminate weapons through disarmament treaties. Over thirty years and in 4 international treaties we have seen how the alliance with US affects how Australia engage in the treaty process.

SafeGround experience engaging the Australian government on international disarmament treaties, 1990s-present - hindrance of the alliance in action

The US-Australia alliance affects foreign and defence policy in a variety of ways. SafeGround, by our nature as a disarmament-focused organisation to end the suffering caused by indiscriminate weapons, has engaged with the Australian government on policy positions regarding disarmament issues and treaty processes for some thirty years. During this experience we have witnessed Australia following the US position time and again. Australia adopted the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty and 2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions, while the US did not. We have seen how actions by Australia have affected the treaty processes and to a certain extent the actual outcome of treaties, causing harm to Australia's international reputation, creating a gap between public opinion and government behaviour, and weakening the treaties.

SafeGround was originally founded as the International Campaign to Ban Landmines-Australian Network and informally referred to as ANBL to drive the creation of the 'Mine Ban Treaty' (MBT) domestically and internationally. As the efforts to establish the Mine Ban Treaty and to encourage ratification by Australia were successful, another issue, that of cluster munitions, became important. ANBL consequently took up this issue, working with the global 'Cluster Munitions Coalition', which saw a similar process for another treaty. Recognising the importance of this work, the Australian Network officially became The Australian Network to Ban Landmines and Cluster Munitions (ANBLIC) working with the global 'Cluster Munitions Coalition' to achieve a global ban on these legacy weapons. This small organisation redefined itself in 2012 to refocus the scope of its work, adopting the name SafeGround. SafeGround started examining the issues of explosive remnants of war in Asia and the Pacific. We are a partner organisation of ICAN and now lead the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots in Australia, addressing concerns over lethal autonomous weapons. SafeGround has worked intensely with governments, military organisations, departments/ministries of foreign affairs, embassies and other key stakeholders in both Australia and internationally. It has been a long and ongoing journey of almost 30 years dealing with many players. To date, the treaty outcomes have been worth the work and effort. This does not mean it has been an easy journey. If anything it has been the opposite.

To reflect on the process to ban landmines, Australia was far behind those countries working towards a comprehensive ban. Throughout the 1990s, our engagement with the government demonstrated how Australia's position reflected the desires of the US, and at times not even our own military. The Australian Labor government under prime minister Keating thought that getting a ban on an existing and entrenched weapons system was 'a utopian dream'. In 1995 then-Foreign Minister Gareth Evans said the call to ban landmines "hopelessly utopian." This was a view stated by senior Australian officials and shared with US counterparts with a general lack of interest in any work shown at that time. In late 1995, during a national election campaign, the Labor Government declared that Australia was committed to "the elimination of all antipersonnel landmines as an ultimate goal." The Australian Federal Election in March 1996 brought in the new Liberal government under Prime Minister John Howard with Alexander Downer as the Minister for Foreign Affairs. Internationally, work was well underway towards an international instrument that would ban landmines. Minister Downer was quick to announce that 'Australia would lead the world towards a ban'. That was the last positive statement from the Australian government for the next 22 months.

It became evident that major international players, such as the US, were opposed to a comprehensive ban and would apply pressure to undermine efforts. After the diplomatic talks exited the United Nations in 1997, the US did not take part in the treaty negotiation process in full. In their absence, we saw how Australia became the willing messenger for many of the views of the US throughout the process. At this time, a paradigm shift began among the world's militaries. Countries that had been landmine users and manufacturers began to abandon their positions and agreed a ban was possible and preferable. Even when the Australian military had rejected landmines, DFAT maintained a position, against the emerging treaty, in line with US foreign policy, and not the operational needs of the Australian Department of Defence. The Australian government was also acting contrary to public opinion, with a 219,000-strong petition delivered to Parliament in 1995.

In obstructing the treaty process in line with the US-informed position, we experienced how Australia would introduce ambassadors or officials who were considered 'bridge breakers', rather than constructive 'bridge builders'. The appointment of a 'bridge breaker' as the face of Australia pushing a US-aligned position highlights the detrimental effects of the US-Australia alliance. Minister Downer was described as 'difficult, ill-informed and petulant' by other senior ministers and diplomats from participating nations. At a very blunt meeting between ANBL members and the Australian Ambassador in 1997, it was pointed out that 'it was not in Australia's benefit to be outside of this treaty and the campaign was confident they would sign. It was just a matter of the journey to get there as either a hero or villain.' We watched as the Australian government stuck to the villain role and were subsequently battered both within meetings and by the media until a few weeks prior to the treaty signing when Australia announced they would sign. Upon signing, Australia took a more constructive approach to the obligations of the treaty and allocated significant funds to assist victims and the clearance of affected lands. From the perspective of the campaign, Australia took the wrong side at the behest of the US. This gained Australia a considerable amount of bad press and as a result soured international relationships when, ultimately, Australia did sign and become a positive actor. When Australia could be a leader on the world stage, the lack of independence from the US in our foreign and defence policies saw us acting in ways that were detrimental to our international reputation

Forward to 2006 and international efforts are underway to create the treaty that will deal with Cluster Munitions. A series of international meetings were convened and Australia resumed their pattern of undermining these efforts. Much had been learned by both international governments and treaty campaigners since the Mine Ban Treaty. Some had learned how to achieve a new treaty while others had learned to weaken or undermine it. In a carbon copy of the journey to ban landmines, the Australian Rudd government took the role of spoiler on behalf of the US again. This same journey repeated itself right to the point where they signed the negotiated treaty when due. Australia had again taken a hostile role only to turn around and sign the treaty. The position in 2008 made even less sense than the position during the Mine Ban Treaty negotiations in 1997. In 1997 the Australian military possessed small supplies of anti-personnel landmines and these were still within the operational mentality of the Australian military. The 2008 position saw Australia arguing to weaken the treaty text that would ban a weapon system, cluster munitions, that we did not possess nor had possessed. Furthermore, when it came to ratification Australia added terms that did not reflect the letter or the spirit of the treaty. The Australian legislation (Section 72.41) opened the way for Australian forces to assist in activities prohibited by the treaty. Also (Section 72.42) explicitly allows foreign forces to stockpile and transit cluster munitions on Australian soil. Yet again it seemed the Australian government acted specifically to facilitate the US's wishes.

The last 8 years have seen nations meet at the United Nations to discuss questions and concerns raised by lethal autonomous weapons systems. The need for new international law to retain human control over the use of force is now a multilateral priority, yet we find Australia is again following the position of the US. While most countries are calling for a legally-binding instrument to prohibit and restrict autonomous weapons, Australia calls a new treaty premature as it regards existing law as

sufficiently robust. Its position is shared by other nations working to delay any such new international effort including the US, UK, India, Russia, and Israel.

In the 30 year journey that SafeGround has worked on disarmament issues, engaging with the Australian government, we have seen time and again the effort to weaken, undermine or delay initiatives that had great international momentum. These efforts seem informed by the position of our US ally and not our own national interest. The resulting behaviour damages the reputation of Australia politically in the international arena with allies and neighbours. We have other neighbours who also have close US ties but make more independent decisions, and have been leaders in this process. New Zealand is a US ally, but they stepped up and hosted an international conference in the Cluster Munitions treaty negotiation process. Australia's attempts at delaying treaties, at weakening treaty texts, and at adding terms in national legislation that do not reflect the letter or the spirit of that particular treaty have contributed to long-lasting effects for communities on the ground.

Australia can and should have strong opinions and debate these vigorously at international negotiations but we should always be fighting for what is humane, what is safest, and what is morally upright and not what is in the interest of another country.