

ARMS CONTROL ASSOCIATION

The authoritative source on arms control

Published on *Arms Control Association* (<http://www.armscontrol.org>)

[Home](#) > The Australia Group at a Glance

The Australia Group at a Glance

December 2010

Press Contacts: [Daryl Kimball](#), Executive Director at (202) 463-8270 x107

Updated: December 2010

Established in 1985, the Australia Group is a voluntary, informal, export-control arrangement through which 40 countries, as well as the European Commission, coordinate their national export controls to limit the supply of chemicals and biological agents-as well as related equipment, technologies, and knowledge-to countries and nonstate entities suspected of pursuing chemical or biological weapons (CBW) capabilities.^[1] All participants are members of the 1997 Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) and have stated that they view the Australia Group as a practical way to uphold the core purpose of these accords: preventing the spread of chemical and biological weapons.

Citing the use of chemical weapons during the Iran-Iraq war, the Australian government proposed creating the group in April 1985 as a means of uniting 15 countries that had independently established national controls on chemical weapons-related exports. At the first meeting in June 1985, the Australia Group initially focused on chemical weapons but by 1990 had extended its activities to include biological weapons. Although the group has traditionally aimed to prevent states from acquiring CBW-related materials, it decided at its June 2002 meeting to also address the flow of CBW capabilities to nonstate actors, such as terrorists.

The Australia Group establishes "control lists," and its members are expected to deny export license requests for items on the lists when there is a concern that the items might be used in a CBW program. Each year members meet in Paris to coordinate these export control policies, discuss possible revisions to the common control lists, and share intelligence about global CBW proliferation and export denials. The group has no charter or constitution, and each country uses its own discretion when implementing national export controls, relying on the group's lists as a baseline but often creating stricter controls than suggested by the group. Sensitive items on these control lists can be divided into five categories:

- Chemical weapons precursors-chemicals used in the production of chemical weapons.
- Dual-use chemical manufacturing facilities, equipment, and related technology-items that can be used either for civilian purposes or for chemical weapons production, such as reactors, storage tanks, pumps, and valves.
- Biological agents-disease-causing microorganisms, whether natural or genetically modified, such as smallpox, Marburg, foot-and-mouth disease, and anthrax.
- Toxins-poisonous substances either made by living organisms or produced synthetically that adversely affect humans, animals, or plants, such as botulinum toxin and ricin.
- Dual-use biological equipment-items that can be used for both peaceful research and biological weapons production, such as fermenters, containment facilities, freeze-drying equipment, and aerosol testing chambers.

As with all other decisions, the Australia Group accepts new members only by consensus. Countries wishing to gain membership to the group must meet certain criteria, including proven compliance with the CWC and the BWC, and an established, effective national export control and enforcement mechanism for all the items on the group's control

lists. In deciding whether to accept new members, each current member also weighs its willingness to share intelligence with the applicant country. Nonparticipating states complain that the criteria for membership are excessively strict and that denying a country membership implicitly accuses that applicant of pursuing chemical or biological weapons.

Nonmembers have also questioned the Australia Group's relationship to the CWC and BWC. Countries in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), for instance, have repeatedly asserted that they already made legally binding commitments not to acquire CBW by signing the biological and chemical weapons conventions, and that the Australia Group is at odds with the BWC provision for the "fullest possible technical exchange" for the advancement of peaceful scientific endeavors. Participants of the Australia Group, however, maintain that the group complements CWC and the BWC and serves the same goals. A U.S. State Department official explained that "the Australia Group offers another layer of control, but one-in the U.S.'s view-that is consistent with the U.S.'s obligations under the chemical and biological weapons treaties."^[2]

At their June 2002 meeting, the members unanimously decided to adopt a set of formal, but not legally binding, guidelines outlining criteria for evaluating export requests and reaffirming the value of sharing intelligence about CBW proliferation. The two key provisions in these guidelines were a "no undercut" agreement and a "catch all" requirement. In the no-undercut provision, members pledged not to approve a particular export to a specific country that another member had previously denied without first consulting with that member. The catch-all provision requires member countries to be able to halt the transfer of any export, regardless of whether it appears on the group's control lists, if an importer might use it in a chemical or biological weapons program. This provision further stipulates that exporters in member states notify their governments if they suspect that an importer intends to use any import for CBW development.

In response to heightened concerns about chemical and biological terrorism, the group also decided in June 2002 to control the spread of technology by "intangible means," prohibiting the transmission of CBW technologies by e-mail, phone, or fax. For instance, with controls on intangible technology transfers, a company could be required to obtain government authorization before faxing abroad a "cookbook" for growth media that could be used in a biological weapons program.

Although the effectiveness of the Australia Group is difficult to gauge definitively, the 40 member countries assert that the regime acts as an impediment to CBW proliferation by working to ensure that industries in member nations do not, either inadvertently or intentionally, assist states or groups seeking to develop CBW capabilities.

ENDNOTES

1. The 40 states participating in the Australia Group are Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The European Commission also participates. Several other countries, including Russia, India, and China, have national export controls for some, but not all, of the items on the group's lists.

2. Quoted in Lois R. Ember, "Stemming the Tide," *Chemical and Engineering News*, July 15, 2002, p. 28.

Chemical/Biological Arms Control

The Arms Control Association is a non-profit, membership-based organization. If you find our resources useful, please consider joining or making a contribution. *Arms Control Today* encourages reprint of its articles with permission of the Editor.

© 1997-2009 Arms Control Association
1313 L St., NW, Ste. 130
Washington, DC 20005
Tel: (202) 463-8270 | Fax: (202) 463-8273

The Arms Control Association is a non-profit, membership-based organization.
If you find our resources useful, please consider joining or making a contribution.
Arms Control Today encourages reprint of its articles with permission of the Editor.

© 1997-2012 Arms Control Association
1313 L St., NW, Ste. 130
Washington, DC 20005
Tel: (202) 463-8270 | Fax: (202) 463-8273

Source URL: <http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/australiagroup>