

# MP-IDSA *Commentary*

## Four Decades of the Australia Group

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### Summary

The Australia Group remains a vital instrument for reinforcing international norms against chemical and biological weapons proliferation.

The year 2025 marks a critical milestone in arms control and disarmament, with the 40th anniversary of the Australia Group (AG). On 21 July, the Australian Foreign Affairs Ministry<sup>1</sup> hosted a plenary meeting in Sydney to commemorate four decades of work towards promoting non-proliferation of chemical and biological weapons through export controls on precursor materials. Participants reaffirmed their support for the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC). One significant outcome of the plenary meeting was a call to subject exports of chloropicrin and other dual-use chemicals to strict export controls. This was on account of the alleged use of the chemical agent against Ukraine, an AG participant. The participants also commended the work of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in addressing the elimination of Syria’s chemical weapons stockpiles after the regime change. The member states recognised India’s active participation through the Indian Chemical Council and Indian industry initiatives to maintain adequate export controls on chemical and biological agents.

## Background

The formation of the Australia Group in 1985 addressed a significant loophole in the international non-proliferation regime. The foundation for creating a norm on restricting the transfer of materials necessary for building a chemical or biological weapons programme was laid during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988).<sup>2</sup> In 1984, a specialised United Nations investigation team<sup>3</sup> confirmed that Iraq had used nerve agents and sulphur mustard against Iranian forces. It was also discovered that the precursors and necessary equipment for Iraq’s chemical weapons programme had been sourced through legitimate and commercial channels.<sup>4</sup>

While the 1925 Geneva Convention<sup>5</sup> did prohibit ‘the use of asphyxiating, poisonous, and other gases as well as the bacteriological methods of warfare’,<sup>6</sup> it did not provide a framework for reducing proliferation through regulating the sourcing of precursor

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<sup>1</sup> [“Statement by the Chair of the 2025 Australia Group Plenary”](#), The Australia Group, hosted by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Government of Australia, 18 July 2025.

<sup>2</sup> Javed Ali, [“Chemical Weapons and the Iran-Iraq War: A Case Study in Noncompliance”](#), *The Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 8, No. 1, Spring 2001, pp. 43–58.

<sup>3</sup> [“Report of the Specialists Appointed by the Secretary-General to Investigate Allegations by the Islamic Republic of Iran Concerning the Use of Chemical Weapons”](#), S/16433, United Nations Security Council, 26 March 1984.

<sup>4</sup> [“Factsheet: The Australia Group”](#), Center for Arms Control and Non-proliferation, 16 March 2023.

<sup>5</sup> [“Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use in War of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or Other Gases, and of Bacteriological Methods of Warfare \(Geneva Protocol\), 17 June 1925”](#), International Humanitarian Law Databases.

<sup>6</sup> Ajey Lele, [“50 Years of the Biological Weapons Convention: Tracking the Journey”](#), Pentagon Press, Delhi, 1 June 2025.

materials. The direct use of chemical weapons by one state against the other, during the Iran–Iraq War, constituted a violation of the Geneva Conventions. It also raised critical questions about the manufacturing of these lethal chemicals as well as access to the materials necessary for the production of chemical weapons.

The nerve agent, Tabun, used by Iraqi forces against Iran was discovered and manufactured by Germany during World War II. Mustard Gas, another lethal chemical weapon which Iraq used, was made through the precursor chemical called thiodiglycol; at that time, this was heavily used in the textile industry.<sup>7</sup> These findings indicated the absence of international frameworks that could regulate the usage of chemicals that could be diverted to lethal weapons production, and also control the transfer of relevant source materials or precursors needed for chemical weapons programmes.

The Australian government recognised that a uniform framework was needed to address these issues and therefore proposed a meeting of countries that had imposed voluntary export controls. The inaugural meeting was held in Brussels in June 1985.<sup>8</sup> This meeting culminated in the establishment of an informal forum that eventually became known as the Australia Group. The central aim of this grouping was to ensure that industries in the participating countries did not facilitate the development of chemical weapons capabilities through the export of source materials.

The group's initial mandate was to regulate chemical weapon precursors. However, it expanded after the United Nations Special Commission on Iraq (UNSCOM) revealed evidence in favour of Iraq's biological weapons programme.<sup>9</sup> The group agreed to adopt export control measures for biological agents as well. Although the Australia Group includes voluntary export licensing restrictions among its members, its informal nature makes these obligations non-binding. However, the group has become a prime example of the normative structures that have been developed over time for the non-proliferation of chemical and biological weapons. Thus, as international legal instruments such as the CWC and the BWC evolved, the Australia Group served as a practical mechanism to fulfil the non-proliferation obligations set out in those treaties.

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<sup>7</sup> “[Chemical Warfare in the Iraq-Iran War: Fact Sheet](#)”, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), May 1984.

<sup>8</sup> “[History—The Australia Group: Origins](#)”, The Australia Group, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Government of Australia.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen Black, Henrietta Wilson, and Filippa Lentzos, “[UNSCOM's Work to Uncover Iraq's Illicit Biological Weapons Program: A Primer](#)”, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 77, No. 4, 2021, pp. 199–202.

## Continued Relevance

What began as an informal gathering of 15 nations soon gained momentum and expanded into a grouping of 42 countries, including the European Union. The Australia Group today functions as a control mechanism through which participating member states coordinate export controls to prevent the acquisition of chemical precursors, biological agents, and related dual-use materials that could be diverted for chemical or biological weapons programmes. One of their foremost tasks is to develop and maintain Common Control Lists,<sup>10</sup> covering chemical weapons precursors, biological agents and dual-use equipment. The focus on dual-use chemical and biological equipment is significant, as it addresses the problem of regulating chemical or biological compounds that are otherwise used for civilian or research purposes but could be diverted to a chemical or biological weapons programme.

Although its informal structure makes its mandate non-binding on the member states, each member of the Australia Group adheres to the customary obligation to develop national export licensing measures in line with the Common Control Lists. Participating member states have licensing measures for over 54 precursor chemicals to chemical weapons.<sup>11</sup> India also agreed to the voluntary national export licensing measures by joining the grouping in 2018.<sup>12</sup> In addition to licensing the transfer of chemical and biological agents, the Australia Group also shares information on proliferation risks<sup>13</sup> among member states. The annual plenary meetings among member states are conducted to exchange information on implementation and dangers.

## Future Challenges

Controlling exports and access to lethal chemicals, their precursors, and biological agents is particularly critical during periods of heightened geopolitical tensions and a world order marked by active conflicts. In this context, the Australia Group serves as an indispensable mechanism for maintaining and coordinating restrictions on the

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<sup>10</sup> “[Australia Group Common Control Lists](#)”, The Australia Group, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Government of Australia.

<sup>11</sup> “[Background Paper](#)”, The Australia Group, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Government of Australia.

<sup>12</sup> “[India Joins the Australia Group \(AG\)](#)”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 19 January 2018.

<sup>13</sup> “[Activities](#)”, The Australia Group, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Government of Australia.

transfer of precursor chemicals and biological agents that could be diverted for hostile purposes.

At its plenary meeting in July 2025, the Australia Group also recognised the challenges it faces in an increasingly complex and dynamic international security environment. It underscored the need to account for emerging threats and rapid technological developments, particularly the convergence of biotechnology and artificial intelligence. There is thus a pressing need to develop regulatory frameworks that address these emerging threats. Given its informal and non-binding structure, the Group’s effectiveness largely depends on the voluntary, normative adherence of participating states. This reliance poses a challenge in ensuring uniform implementation and sustained commitment to controlling the transfer of critical chemical and biological agents.

With allegations of chemical weapons usage in armed conflicts and the challenges posed to verification and compliance with the CWC and BWC, the work of the Australia Group becomes all the more critical. The regular and sustained involvement of member states in advancing the group’s vision further strengthens its capacity to adapt to emerging challenges.

The Group’s decision-making process depends significantly on consensus among the participating states. The latest plenary outcomes indicate that there remains a consensus to strengthen counter-proliferation measures for chemical and biological weapons. Thus, in an uncertain and dynamic global proliferation environment, the Australia Group remains a vital instrument for reinforcing international norms against chemical and biological weapons proliferation.

## About the Author

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