Australia and NATO: Six Decades of Cooperation

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In the nineteenth century, British and other European migrants transformed Australia, Canada and New Zealand into major pillars of the late British Empire. The societies of all three Dominions were culturally, politically and economically linked to Britain and Europe. All three Dominions provided large contributions to the British war effort in Europe in the First and Second World Wars. And, in a significant shift in traditional alliance structures, all three entered new defence treaties with the United States (US) after the Second World War that ultimately eclipsed their old Commonwealth links with Britain.

Here, however, the similarities end. Canada, with coasts on both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, became a founding member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) with a continued focus on the common defence of Europe. Australia and New Zealand, however, increasingly became preoccupied with strategic developments in Asia and Oceania, and their defence policy and priorities diverged substantially from those of Britain and Canada. Given the strong historic, cultural and political links between Australia and NATO countries, the paucity of links between NATO and Australia, throughout much of the Cold War and beyond, remains somewhat surprising – not least since this relationship rapidly changed in the second half of the 2000s.

In the context of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operation in Afghanistan, to which Australia contributed significant forces, Australia went from having no permanent presence at NATO, to being officially represented by an accredited ambassador, along with a senior two-star military representative, and officers attached to all major NATO

headquarters involved in the Afghanistan operation. From no political relationship, Australia went on to become a contact country, then a "global partner" with a formal partnership agreement, and regular attendance of Australian prime ministers and foreign and defence ministers at NATO council meetings. From very limited technical exchanges, a formal cooperation programme developed, that now includes participation in many NATO conferences and seminars, separate information exchange and logistics agreements, and even NATO research and development activities hosted in Australia.[1]

What does this mean for Australia's relations with NATO after the Afghanistan commitment? Sections one to four of this chapter analyse the main periods in the history of Australia-NATO relations, discussing why it took so long for the Australia-NATO partnership to arrive at where it is today. From the insights gathered through this historical analysis, section five discusses what the history of Australia-NATO relations can tell us about the future of the relationship after Afghanistan. This chapter argues that Australia's future engagement with NATO will not drop to the near-absence of links before the 2000s. Nor, however, is it likely that the rapid intensification of the relationship in recent years will continue. Politically, the significance of the relationship is likely to diminish (although not disappear) with the end of operations in Afghanistan. In relation to practical exchanges, however, the cooperation that exists today is more reflective of Australia's enduring strategic priorities than was its absence in earlier decades. Politically, both Australia and NATO will continue to have a more global perspective on security than they did in previous decades, which will sustain the value of high-level exchanges. Cooperation in Afghanistan has been a catalyst for enduring change, and the current relationship between Australia and NATO is likely to represent a "new normal," which will endure past the end of that particular operation.

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1   Warren Snowdon, "Australia hosts NATO camouflage trial," *Media Release*, 13 April 2012, http://www. dsto.defence.gov.au/news/6872/ (4 June 2014).

Australasian Britain and the Common Defence of Europe, 1914-1954

Before and after Federation in 1901, the Australian colonies saw their security as inseparable from that of the wider British Empire. Hence, when Britain declared war on Germany over the attack on Belgium in 1914, Australians rallied to the flag and sent overseas the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) for service in the Middle East and at the Western Front. And when Germany invaded Poland in 1939, Prime Minister Robert Menzies informed Australians that "Great Britain has declared war upon [Germany] and that as a result, Australia is also at war."[2] Australian crews and bomber units were an integral part of the British Royal Air Force throughout the European war. Following the fall of France, however, the "Second AIF" only made it to the Middle East, where it participated in the Greece, North Africa and Syria campaigns. Following the fall of Singapore, Australia recalled its land forces home to defend Papua and New Guinea against the Japanese. For the remainder of the war, most Australian forces fought in the Pacific under US strategic command, with little relation to the British war effort in Europe or East Asia (Burma).

After the Second World War, as the United States demobilized and seemed to withdraw once more into relative isolation, Australia renewed its defence planning as part of the British Commonwealth. Commonwealth strategy agreed upon at the post-war Prime Ministers' conferences placed far greater priority on the Dominions' responsibility for their own, local defence, in addition to contributions to the global war effort. Stopping a Soviet advance on the European continent was then beyond the power of the Empire. For Australia, local defence in South East Asia, and deployments to the British Far East or Middle East were the main contributions it planned for in case of war against the Soviet Union.[3] Following the fall of mainland China to the Communists, South East Asia and the Middle East

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2   Quoted in LC Key, "Australia in Commonwealth and World Affairs 1939-1944," *International Affairs* 21:1, 1945, p. 67.
3   See: Stephan Frühling, *A History of Australian Strategic Policy since 1945*, Canberra, Defence Publishing Service, 2009.

became the main areas for an Australian contribution to the security of the Commonwealth.

At the same time, however, Britain itself began to commit once again to the common defence of the mainland of Europe, through the Dunkirk Treaty of 1947, the Brussels Treaty of 1948 and the Washington Treaty of 1949. Australia was not part of these treaties or commitments, but retained its links and cooperation with Britain through the Commonwealth framework. And it was by virtue of this separate relationship with Britain, one of NATO's main member countries, that Australian forces first came to operate under NATO command in 1952.

In early 1951, Britain was in a diplomatic tug-of-war with the United States over the establishment of the NATO command system in the Mediterranean. The British sought a Middle Eastern command under a British officer, preferably with command over the US Sixth Fleet and directly responsible to the Standing Group (the predecessor of today's Military Committee). In contrast, the US view was that Mediterranean operations should come under the responsibility of US-led Allied Command South.[4] It was in this context that Britain asked for an Australian contribution to the Commonwealth's position in the Middle East, and two (under-strength) Australian fighter squadrons and associated base units arrived in Malta in mid-1952, so that they could reinforce British units for service in the Middle East.

By this time, however, NATO had established the new Allied Forces Mediterranean Command, which assumed command over British forces in Malta. As a result, the Royal Australian Air Force's 78 Wing participated in many NATO exercises in the Mediterranean, the Middle East and Central Europe. Of particular note was its participation in NATO's Exercise "Coronet," a large 1953 air force exercise in Germany, during which it operated from an Australian-manned improvised airfield outside Cologne. After the exercise, "senior NATO air officers" were quoted in the

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4   Dionysios Chourchoulis, "High Hopes, Bold Aims, Limited Results: Britain and the Establishment of the NATO Mediterranean Command, 1950–1953," *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 20:3, 2009, pp. 434-452.

Australian press as saying that the Wing would be "far better off based in West Germany than in Malta."[5]

This was not to be. 78 Wing returned home in 1954, after Australia had decided to give priority to the security of South East Asia in both Cold War and global war situations. Instead of the Mediterranean, the new Far East Strategic Reserve in Malaya, consisting of British, Australian and New Zealand forces, became the new focus of Australia's cooperation within the Commonwealth. But although 78 Wing's accidental NATO role remained an episode that is now largely forgotten, it holds an important lesson for the future of Australia-NATO relations: Australia has always shared NATO's values and interests; it has a treaty commitment with the United States and historical political links with several NATO members; and Australia's participation in military operations as part of the Anglo-Saxon and broader Western community is an integral part of its history, policy and even national identity. But despite all this, the fundamentally different geographic locations of Australia and NATO have meant that for a long time the activities of each had very little relevance for the other – and, ultimately, these same geostrategic differences still exert a strong influence on the strategic priorities of both NATO and Australia today.

A Different Experience of Alliance: Australia's Defence Policy, 1954-1990

As Australia withdrew 78 Wing from its inadvertent NATO role, it was at the same time building its own alliance links with another NATO member, the United States. One of Australia's motivations for pursuing the trilateral Australia, New Zealand and United States (ANZUS) treaty in 1952 was the hope that it could gain insight and input into US operational planning in the Pacific, akin to the arrangements then developing in NATO. This was, however, strongly resisted by the Pentagon. Following the creation of the South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954,

5 "R.A.A.F. Wing in Arduous, Revealing Ruhr Exercises," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 August 1953, p. 2.

Australia sought the same objective through this new framework – with similarly disappointing results, as the United States remained reluctant, for political, practical and security reasons, to conduct meaningful planning in SEATO. Nonetheless, allied war plans for the defence of South East Asia during the 1950s – like those of NATO – were based on the doctrine of "massive retaliation" against a feared Communist invasion. As part of its commitment to SEATO and to strengthen Western deterrence, Australia from 1962 to 1968 placed a forward-based fighter squadron in Thailand.

Despite these superficial similarities between Australia's and NATO's posture, however, Australia's experience of alliance with the United States differed significantly from that of the European NATO members. Doubts about the credibility of US guarantees in the 1960s were also shared in Australia, especially under Prime Minister John Gorton (1968-1971). But Australia had never received explicit US extended deterrence guarantees, because it was never under direct threat from nuclear weapons or even conventional attack, other than as a consequence of a conflict already involving the United States. Hence, it never had to work through the difficult strategic dilemmas facing NATO during that time, that arose from the increasing vulnerability of the US homeland to a retaliatory Soviet strike. The strategy of "flexible response" that the United States and later NATO adopted to deal with this problem had no equivalent in Australia's strategic experience. Instead, the alliance with the United States during the 1960s rested on joint deployments in South East Asia, especially in Thailand and the War in Vietnam. But although Australia supported and encouraged US engagement in the region, ANZUS itself never developed into an institution for the coordination of allies' foreign policy, in the way that became ingrained in NATO's engagement with the Eastern bloc after the 1967 Harmel Report.

For geographic reasons, Australia provided a highly valuable location for a range of US installations, including the submarine communications station at North West Cape, the Defense Support Programme satellite station in Nurrungar, and the large intelligence satellite control facility at Pine Gap. Through these "Joint Facilities," Australia became important for

the command and control of US strategic nuclear forces. The Joint Facilities and close signals intelligence cooperation under the Five-Eyes framework between the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand remain by far the closest areas of cooperation in the Australia-US alliance, but most of these arrangements remained shrouded in strict secrecy for many years (and indeed many do to this day).

In the early 1970s, Australian strategic policy entered a new era. Britain withdrew from "East of Suez" and chose integration with Europe over links with the Commonwealth. The Defence Department and intelligence agencies finally moved from their colonial-era offices and mind-sets in Melbourne to Canberra, and the election of the Labor party government under Gough Whitlam ended 23 years of conservative rule. In Asia, the US-China rapprochement and the fall of Sukarno in Indonesia made Australia's strategic environment far less threatening. Australian navy vessels and maritime patrol aircraft, operating from Butterworth air base in Malaysia, continued to shadow Soviet naval units passing through the region. As a central determinant of defence policy and force structure as a whole, however, the Cold War ended for Australia with the return of forces from Vietnam in 1972.

Australia's defence policy and organization deliberately focused inwards when the country entered the "Defence of Australia" era in the 1970s. "Self-reliance" became the key strategic concept – the ability to defeat regional threats against Australia without having to rely on US combat or combat support forces. This new policy posed difficult new problems, in both practical and conceptual terms. The geography of northern Australia is inhospitable, and there are few settlements and even fewer units or installations of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) outside the Southeast and Southwest of this vast continent [**Map 3**]. Longstanding service traditions were challenged by the notion that they should now prepare to fight independently as a joint ADF, rather than as part of a larger allied sister-service. Indeed, some policy-makers at the time looked to neutrals like Sweden and Switzerland, with their militia-based defence organization, as the most appropriate European countries to learn from and emulate,

rather than to US allies in NATO.[6]

But whereas NATO and European neutrals during the 1970s and 1980s faced an increasingly sophisticated and heavy conventional and nuclear threat from the Soviet Union, Australia's relatively benign strategic environment meant that force development would focus on low-intensity threats, with years of warning assumed for more significant threats. As a result, the ADF's force structure, posture and capabilities began to diverge significantly from those of its traditional partners, the United Kingdom and United States, and from NATO.[7] The Royal Australian Navy continued to exercise with the US Pacific Fleet, but many parts of the ADF during the 1970s and 1980s hardly ever saw, let alone operated alongside, US forces.
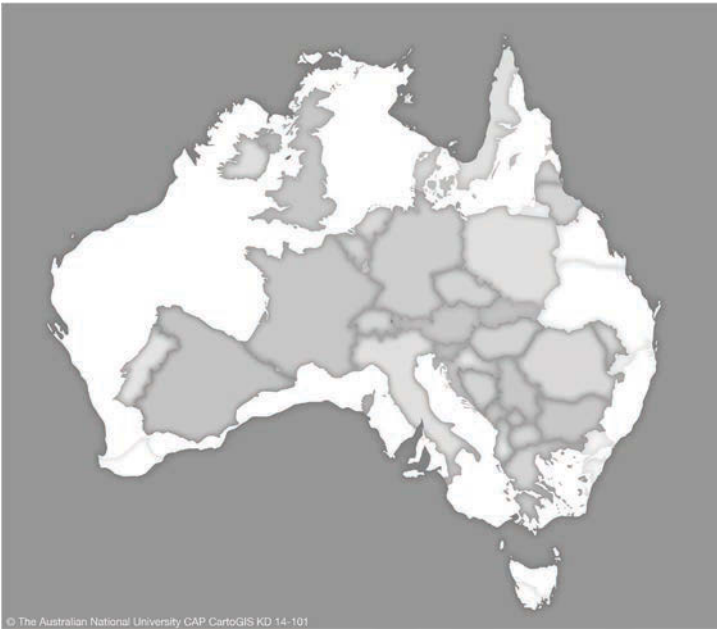
Map 3. Geographic size of Australia and Europe compared

6   See, for example, Alan Wrigley, *The Defence Force and the Community*, Canberra, Australian Government Publishing Service, 1990.

7   Alan Thompson, *Defence Down Under: Evolution and Revolution 1971-88*, Working Paper 40, Sir Robert Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, University of London, 1988.

One important reason for Australia's relative disengagement from wider Western concerns in the northern hemisphere was the realization that regional threats in its own neighbourhood had little priority for its major ally. The United States had repeatedly proved reluctant to provide political support, let alone guarantees of military assistance, when Australia came into conflict with Indonesia. In the late 1950s, Australia supported the Netherlands against Indonesia over the future of Dutch West Papua, but failed to gain US support against Indonesia's claims over the territory. In the 1960s, Australian and Indonesian forces fought each other in Borneo when Australia, Britain and New Zealand supported Malaysia against Indonesia's "policy of 'Confrontation'" against that country.[8]

Even during the era of "forward defence" in South East Asia, Australia was quite aware that its alliance with the United States was less institutionalized, less comprehensive and arguably less reliable than was NATO. In the words of Australia's classified defence guidance from 1976, "the general proposition about Australia's security from major military threat, and the assurance of US combat support, need qualification in respect of Indonesia."[9] NATO's concept of the "indivisibility of security in the Alliance'" has no equivalent in ANZUS − quite the contrary, US officials repeatedly made the limits of US assistance against Indonesia quite explicit. And the suspension of the US treaty guarantee to New Zealand, after it refused port access to potentially nuclear-armed US Navy vessels in the mid-1980s, would arguably also have been unthinkable in the NATO context.

Hence, Australia's strategic and defence planning went its own way in the 1970s and 1980s. While Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser (1975-1983) was vocal in his support for the West against the Soviet Union, significantly increasing defence expenditure after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, even his government declined a US invitation to participate in the US

8   See: Peter Edwards, *Crises & Commitments: The Politics and Diplomacy of Australia's Involvement in Southeast Asian Conflicts 1948-1965*, Allen & Unwin, 1992.
9   Defence Committee, *Australian Strategic Analysis and Defence Policy Objectives*, 2 September 1976, para 86, in Frühling (ed.), *A History of Australian Strategic Policy since 1945*.

Rapid Deployment Force for the Persian Gulf in 1979. The cost of the Vietnam War, where 521 Australian regulars and national servicemen had died, remained a heavy burden on the domestic support for Australia's US alliance for many years. In addition, there was considerable antipathy on the left of the political spectrum to the "Joint Facilities" and their role in supporting US strategic nuclear forces.

In 1983, a new Labor government under Bob Hawke conducted a formal review of whether the alliance with the United States still served Australia's national interests. At the same time, NATO's mostly conservative governments demonstrated remarkable political cohesion when they implemented the "dual track" decision and deployed intermediate-range nuclear forces into Western Europe. In the end, reconciling the Australian Labor party with the US alliance was one of the great achievements of Hawke's prime ministership, but the political and strategic contrast between NATO's and Australia's situation could hardly have been greater.[10]

This did not, however, mean that European NATO allies were completely irrelevant to Australia. The ability of the ADF to operate self-reliantly increased the need to operate efficiently and effectively, and to maintain professional standards and expertise. Although many high-end warfighting capabilities were not required for Australia's direct defence in the 1970s to 1990s, the ADF sought to maintain relevant expertise through the posting of ADF officers on exchanges overseas. For historical reasons, the British armed forces remained particularly important in this regard, and many Australian officers during the Cold War served in the British Army of the Rhine, or on Royal Navy ships in European waters. Australia created targeted links with several other European countries around the purchase and sustainment of major platforms, including French fighter jets, German tanks and frigates, and Italian mine hunters. It participated in standardization activities with its traditional Anglo-Saxon partners (United States, Britain, Canada and New Zealand), including the ABCA armies' programme, AUSCANNZUKUS

10   See: Gregory Pemberton, "Australia and the United States," in *Diplomacy in the Marketplace: Australia in World Affairs, 1981-1990,* eds. P.J. Boyce and J.R. Angel, Melbourne, Longman Cheshire, 1992, pp. 123-145.

naval cooperation, the Air Standardization Coordinating Committee, Combined Communications Electronics Board, and The Technical Cooperation Programme.[11] Insofar as many manuals resulting from these fora were based on NATO Standardization Agreements (STANAGs) and vice versa, a certain measure of commonality was maintained between NATO and Australia. Through officers on exchange to Britain, Australia participated in NATO ordnance committees, and it became a member of the NATO Sea Sparrow Consortium developing ship self-defence missiles. Aside from these limited activities, however, there was no contact between Australia and the North Atlantic Alliance – nor was there any perceived need for it.

Ships Passing in the Night: Australia and NATO, 1990-2005

Because of its geostrategic location, the end of the Cold War was far less consequential for Australia than it was for NATO. Nonetheless, the changing security environment and multinational operations of the 1990s and early 2000s meant that shared interests and the potential for cooperation between Australia and NATO began to increase again. Despite Australia's reputation today as a reliable contributor to international coalition operations, it took two decades for the country to shed its aversion to overseas deployments that arose from the Vietnam War. Decisions to deploy mine clearance divers to the Gulf in 1987,[12] and participation in the first Gulf War – limited to a naval task group that did not see combat – were quite controversial at the time.[13] In the context of humanitarian interventions and United Nations (UN) blue helmet missions in Namibia (1989-90), in Somalia (1991-95),

11   ABCA (American, British, Canadian, Australian and New Zeland); AUSCANNZUKUS (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United Kingdom, United States). See: Thomas-Durell Young, "Cooperative Diffusion through Cultural Similarity: The Postwar Anglo-Saxon Experience," in *The Diffusion of Military Technology and Ideas*, eds. Emily O. Goldman and Leslie C. Eliason, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2003, pp. 93-113.
12   Kim Beazley, "Operation Sandglass: Old History, Contemporary Lessons," *Security Challenges* 4:3, 2008, pp. 23-43.
13   Roger Bell, "Reassessed: Australia's Relationship with the United States," in *Seeking Asian Engagement: Australia In World Affairs, 1991-1995,* eds. James Cotton and John Ravenhill, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 211-212.

in Cambodia (1991-93) and Rwanda (1994-95), Australia thus underwent its own version of an "out of area" debate at the end of the Cold War.

This might have led to increased contact between Australia and NATO, had the ADF participated in the UN or NATO operations in the former Yugoslavia. New Zealand deployed a reinforced company to the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) operation in Bosnia-Herzegovina, in an attempt to rebuild international defence links after the suspension of the ANZUS alliance by the United States. In contrast, Australia decided against any deployment because it considered the conflict a European responsibility, and sought to avoid further tensions between its Croat and Serbian migrant communities. Therefore it did not feature amongst the range of partner countries that operated alongside the North Atlantic Alliance in this series of conflicts that preoccupied NATO throughout the 1990s.[14] Australia joined the National Reserve Forces Committee, which formally became a NATO committee in 1996, as a permanent observer, but otherwise contact between NATO and Australia remained as limited as it had been in earlier decades. In its defence policy statements the new conservative Coalition government under Prime Minister John Howard (1996-2007) gave somewhat greater prominence to coalition contributions, but Australia's focus remained on its own region and the multinational fora emerging within it, especially the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum created in 1994.

The 1990s ended with a confirmation that the US alliance had very real limits, when Indonesian militias started a systematic campaign of wide-scale violence following the East Timorese referendum for independence. Only a few months after the United States had fought against Serbia as part of the NATO operation to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe in Kosovo, the Clinton administration declined direct participation in Australia's International Force East Timor (INTERFET) operation, and limited itself to logistical support. Australia's Prime Minister commented later that "we

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14   A significant number of individual Australian officers on exchange to British and US units participated in these conflicts, and Australia also agreed to provide a few staff officers to the British Army.

all felt a bit sort of alone on it [sic]."[15] Unlike the United States, many European NATO members – including Britain, Portugal, Italy and France – provided combat units, but again there was no role for NATO and, with the exception of former colonial power Portugal, other European forces did not remain beyond the initial phases of the operation. For Australia, however, this was but one of a series of operational commitments in its South Pacific neighbourhood.[16] Australian combat forces remained in Timor until 2004. From 2003 to 2013, Australia led a regional intervention force to stabilize the Solomon Islands.[17] In 2006, severe riots saw ADF units deployed back to East Timor's capital Dili (where they remained until 2012), the Solomon's capital Honiara, and also temporarily to Tonga. Maintaining stability in the South Pacific thus remains an important strategic priority and focus for Australia – but it is one where the European Union, with its significant aid programme, is far more relevant to Australia as a European partner than is NATO.

Another instance after the Balkan wars, where a slightly different turn of history may have led to an earlier NATO-Australia partnership, came with the 9/11 attacks on the United States in 2001. In the days after the attack, NATO invoked Article 5 of the Washington Treaty for the first time in its history. Prime Minister Howard, who had been in Washington on the day of the attack, likewise invoked Article 4 of the ANZUS treaty for the first time.[18] The door was open for the United States to use NATO to lead the international fight against Al-Qaeda, in which case Australia would almost certainly have built strong political and organizational links with the North Atlantic Alliance. The Bush administration, however, chose otherwise. Australia and European NATO members provided troop contributions on

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15   Iain Henry, "Playing Second Fiddle on the Road to INTERFET: Australia's East Timor Policy Throughout 1999," *Security Challenges* 9:1, 2013, p. 105.
16   The largest deployment before 1999 was the (unarmed) Peace Monitoring Group on Bougainville from 1997-2003.
17   RAMSI – Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands.
18   Article 4 of the ANZUS treaty contains the equivalent to Article 5 in the Washington Treaty, although in a much weaker form. Its main clause is: "Each Party recognizes that an armed attack in the Pacific Area on any of the Parties would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes."

a bilateral basis to the US Central Command (CENTCOM)-led invasion of Afghanistan, but there was no provision for a formalized political, organizational or planning role for NATO. With limited ownership in the operation, most allies withdrew their forces soon after the initial invasion, and Australian forces quit Afghanistan in December 2002.

Defence Minister Robert Hill's push to give the Middle East and "war on terror" greater priority in Australia's defence policy reportedly failed to find the support of Cabinet in Canberra in 2003.[19] Australia participated in Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003, but on the condition that its forces would be withdrawn not long after the initial invasion. Australia's engagement in the Middle East remained guided by considerations of managing its own alliance with the United States, rather than by a fundamental reappraisal of Australia's strategic interests.

NATO-Australia Partnership since 2005

When Australia and NATO finally did cross paths in 2005, it was under quite different circumstances. The war in Iraq had been divisive, both within NATO and domestically within Australia. Hence, when Australia decided to return special forces to Afghanistan in 2005 it did so for similar reasons to NATO's engagement in that country from 2003 − to emphasize its contribution to the "good" war in Afghanistan, while seeking to deflect pressure from returning to a more substantial role to help manage the "bad" war in Iraq. Given the increased overlap of interests and activities in the region, greater interaction between NATO and Australia emerged. Foreign Minister Alexander Downer spoke to the North Atlantic Council in 2004, and Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer visited Australia in 2005, signing an information exchange agreement in the context of NATO's establishment of a new Terrorist Threat Intelligence Unit. Australia also accredited its first defence attaché in Brussels in 2005.

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19   Geoffrey Barker and Laura Tingle, "Canberra toughens pro-war stance despite protests," *Australian Financial Review*, 18 February 2003; Paul Dibb, "Is strategic geography relevant to Australia's current defence policy?" *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 60:2, 2006, pp. 247-264.

In many ways, however, it was the Afghanistan commitment that became the catalyst for Australia's relationship with NATO. Australia deployed a "Reconstruction Task Force" to Oruzgan province in 2006, which operated alongside Dutch forces. Then Defence Minister Brendan Nelson later reflected that:

> I remember … midway through 2006 saying to Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, the Chief of Defence, … we'd better go to Brussels and have a talk to these NATO people. Now, at that stage we dealt with Washington, London, Kabul and, of course, The Hague because we were partnered with the Dutch. And Angus said to me, … oh minister, there's a lot of red tape there, and I said, yeah I know, but they're running the war, I think we'd better go and have a look.[20]

One outcome of that visit in 2006 was that Australia decided to become a "contact country." And yet, there remained a lot of apprehension about engagement with NATO. Australia began to participate in some Partnership for Peace (PfP) activities that suited its interests. At that stage, the very informal status as a contact country suited it well, as Australia was wary to commit to formalized arrangements with the Brussels bureaucracy, and apprehensive as to whether it would have to develop bilateral defence relationships with a whole range of additional NATO member countries.[21] Moreover, Australia was conscious of its own strategic priorities, and there was little support for ideas of a "global NATO" as promoted at the time by former Spanish Prime Minister José Maria Aznar,[22] and American commentators.[23]

As the relationship developed, however, Australia (and NATO) also became aware of the downsides of a low-key relationship. For the new Labor government, elected in 2007, calling on NATO to lift its game in Afghanistan was a convenient way to publicly defend its commitment to an increasingly unpopular war, and to deflect demands for an increase in

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20   Brendan Nelson, Address to the National Press Club, Canberra, 18 September 2013.
21   Interviews by author with Australian officials in Brussels and Canberra, November-December 2008.
22   José Maria Aznar, "NATO-An Alliance for Freedom," *RUSI Journal* 151:4, 2006, pp. 38-40.
23   Ivo Daalder and James Goldgeier, "Global NATO," *Foreign Affairs* 85:5, 2006, pp. 105-113.

Australia's contribution. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, for example, stated that there was no "open cheque" from Australia,[24] and the new Defence Minister Joel Fitzgibbon said: "We can't be expected to do more when so many under-performing NATO countries are not prepared to do more."[25] In this context, it did not help that non-member contributing countries were excluded from some discussions on Afghanistan and, after returning from a NATO defense ministerial meeting in Lithuania in February 2008, Fitzgibbon was quoted in the Australian press as being "shocked," "amazed" and "astounded" that Australia did not have access to the relevant strategy documents and discussions.[26]

Issues of access and participation were ultimately resolved by the NATO Secretary General. A range of high-level visits to Canberra and Brussels of senior public servants, politicians and parliamentary delegations followed in subsequent years.[27] The Rudd Government appointed Brendan Nelson as the first Ambassador to NATO in 2009, recognizing that a more prominent representation and engagement with the Alliance was required to sustain the operational cooperation in Afghanistan. The Australian military representative at NATO was significantly upgraded from Colonel to two-star level the following year, giving additional weight and prominence to the relationship. At the same time, the commencement of maritime security operations by NATO in 2008, responding to the threat of piracy in the Gulf of Aden, added to the range of common interests and operations. Exchanges of maritime awareness data between NATO's Allied Maritime Command and Australia became an additional valuable and enduring area of cooperation, albeit one that was (and remains) less publicly prominent than cooperation in Afghanistan.

Hence the late 2000s saw an increasing familiarity develop between

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24   Dennis Shanahan, "Kevin Rudd in Bucharest for NATO summit on Afghanistan," *The Australian*, 3 April 2008.
25   ABC Lateline, 20 March 2008, transcript, 20 June 2014, http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2007/s2196334.htm
26   Brendan Nicholson, "Australia kept in dark by NATO," *The Age*, 11 February 2008.
27   See: Nina Markovic, *NATO's new Strategic Concept and issues for Australia*, Background Note, Canberra, Parliamentary Library, 2010.

Australia and NATO, both at the political and working levels. This in turn facilitated increased cooperation as additional areas and activities of common interest were identified. Moreover, NATO itself became better organized and systematic in its approach to its partners through the new partnership policy developed after the 2010 Lisbon Summit, which formalized partner involvement in decision-making in NATO-led operations. Earlier Australian concerns about a more formalized relationship thus diminished, and Australia was the first partner country to sign a "Joint Political Declaration" in 2012 to provide a political framework for cooperation with the Alliance, followed by an "Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme" in 2013 – five months shy of the 60th anniversary of 78 Wing's participation in NATO Exercise Coronet outside Cologne.

A New Normal in the NATO-Australia Partnership

In a sense, relations between NATO and Australia have thus come full circle. Increased, formalized cooperation with NATO is a significant change compared to the intervening low in relations experienced after the mid-1950s. The Afghanistan operation starting in 2005 was the bureaucratic and political catalyst for the development of the new NATO-Australia relationship. Australia's ambitions for its future, however, which Australia's former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd aptly described as "flexible and substance-driven cooperation,"[28] are also still a reflection of the same enduring defence policy priorities that had limited it in earlier decades.

Australia has always identified with NATO's values, and will continue to do so. It feels a cultural and political affinity with the Alliance in general, and with its Anglo-Saxon members in particular. Like other Western countries, Australia remains concerned and engaged in developments in the Middle East and international jihadism. Partnership with NATO thus does not signal a political change for Australia in the way it does for Japan or the

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28   Kevin Rudd, "NATO partners earn respect," *The Australian*, 23 April 2011.

European neutrals, as it was always a US ally and, for most of its history, has seen contributions to global security as part of its defence policy.

Its most pressing strategic concerns, however, remain in its immediate neighbourhood and the wider Asia-Pacific, rather than the wider North Atlantic area. As such, operations alongside NATO remain an adjunct and a consequence of Australia's bilateral alliance with the United States, and the desire to demonstrate burden sharing within that alliance. There is no intrinsic value to Australia for operating alongside NATO, but it will want to avoid problems of access to strategic discussions like those which arose around 2008. As such, Australia's ambassador to NATO in 2013 described the future engagement in Brussels after Afghanistan as "a pilot light setting," to keep "the odd person or two that's plugged into the NATO system" and maintain "a position of at least reasonably familiarity" should the ADF operate alongside NATO again.[29]

Australia's change in status from contact country to "Partner Across the Globe" and, since the 2014 Wales Summit, "enhanced opportunity partnership", indicates that both sides are getting increasingly comfortable with closer cooperation. But Australia has little desire for cooperation merely to support a broader political relationship, as is the case with many other NATO partners and the original PfP approach. Rather, it looks to NATO as a cost-effective way of cooperating with high-end military establishments in countries with which it shares its basic values and global interests. Any initiative that will help cost-effectively develop ADF capabilities, or facilitate Australian participation in future NATO-led operations – such as easing NATO's convoluted process for the accreditation of Australian forces – will be welcomed by Australia.

Bottom-up initiatives, where experts are talking to experts and professionals engage with fellow professionals on areas of common interest, will sustain new activities. Australia also has a fundamental interest in maritime awareness in the Indian Ocean, which will provide a measure of operational cooperation with NATO as long as the Alliance continues its

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29   Quoted in Douglas Fry, "NATO's role in a shrinking world," *The Canberra Times*, 29 October 2013.

presence in that region. Scope for operational cooperation will thus remain even as ADF commitments in Afghanistan (and in Australia's immediate neighbourhood in the South Pacific) are wound down. Although many aspects of the information exchange and cooperation in this area are conducted out of the public eye, maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean may increase even further in importance as other regional countries, including India and China, become part of international naval efforts in the region.

Australia certainly welcomed European contributions to the Australian-led INTERFET operation in 1999. In the future, Australia and European allies may well find it easier to use the NATO framework to coordinate requests and generation of forces, should a similar situation arise once more in Australia's immediate neighbourhood. Including such an element of reciprocity into Australia's partnership with NATO could thus enhance the practical value of the organization for Australia as well as its European members.

It is also in Australia's interests for NATO's European members to be aware of the strategic tensions in the Asia-Pacific region, and to consider strategic implications of their relationships in Asia. But this does not mean that Australia will have a particular interest in NATO itself engaging in the Asia-Pacific region. Unlike NATO partners South Korea and Japan, Australia is not directly affected by tensions in Northeast Asia. Hence, whereas North Asian countries might see direct benefit in political support from the Alliance, Australia itself is trying to develop its own new defence relationships in the Asia-Pacific region, and is quite conscious that additional outside players in what is already a crowded diplomatic space may well drown out its own voice. This is particularly the case in South East Asia, which is geographically closest to Australia and which is an area where a large number of outside powers – including China, India, Japan and the United States – are already vying for new strategic and defence relations with regional countries.

Moreover, recent years have demonstrated that even practical cooperation

will remain vulnerable to cuts in overseas postings when defence budgets are lean. In coming years, however, the bipartisan commitment to increase defence spending to 2% of Gross Domestic Product, and a reduced tempo of operations for the ADF will enable participation in more exercises and training activities – as exemplified by the participation of Australian staff in a recent Naval Striking and Support Forces NATO (STRIKFORNATO) exercise.[30] Given cost and distance, such participation will largely be focused on staff officers rather than formed units or major platforms. Cyber, amphibious operations, and ballistic missile defence are three areas where the interests of the Alliance and of Australia in developing new capabilities are likely to overlap in particular, although many of the more mundane and traditional areas of NATO cooperation in logistics, air and maritime operations will also be of enduring relevance to the ADF. In that sense, the future of NATO-Australia relations has already begun.

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30   Julian Hale, "NATO Conducts Exercise to Respond to Global Crises at Short Notice," *Defense News*, 9 May 2014.