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Australia's Last Priority

Article by Benjamin Schreer und Stephan Frühling

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As NATO develops a new strategic concept, a major issue is the future role of its relationships with "partners across the globe." Australia is among the most prominent of these partners, but its main strategic interests remain firmly embedded in the Asia Pacific region. NATO's practical cooperation with partners is thus not a sign of demand for the alliance to play a wider global role.

Any long-term, substantive cooperation by NATO with its "partners across the globe" must be based on corresponding long-term strategic interests. Therefore, the way in which partner countries see the role of NATO in their own strategic outlook and defense policy are important parameters for the discussion of NATO's new strategic concept: They define the future "maneuver space" within which the alliance can set the aims and scope of its "partnerships across the globe."

Australia is perceived by many as a prototypical global partner of the alliance, not least given its deployment of some 1,550 troops to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. Australia is a liberal democracy rooted in the Westminster tradition and is culturally and politically close to both Europe and North America. Throughout its history, it has been closely allied to the United Kingdom and, since World War II, to the United States. Through the ANZUS treaty, the United States and Australia have exchanged pledges of mutual assistance that mirror, if in a weaker formulation, those of the North Atlantic Treaty. The Australian Defence Force (ADF) is a well trained and equipped military force, and highly interoperable with those of NATO. Australia has a long history of military-technical cooperation with NATO, for example in munitions safety and handling, as well as indirectly through its cooperation in the Anglo-Saxon American, British, Canadian, and Australian groups.

Australia's Post-9/11 Cooperation with NATO

As in NATO countries, 9/11 fueled a strategic debate in Australia about global security challenges. Australia invoked the ANZUS treaty for the first time, and sent troops to participate in U.S.-led operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Consequently, Australia and NATO were drawn toward closer cooperation and joint operations with the United States in Afghanistan and the Middle East, and in the fight against global terrorism more broadly. This significantly increased contacts and parallel activities at the political, operational, and technical levels, and led to a corresponding increase in cooperation. As NATO expanded its role in Afghanistan, Australia appointed a defense attaché to Brussels in 2005 to facilitate the political and operational cooperation with the alliance, and signed an agreement on the exchange of classified information. NATO offered Australia participation in Partnership for Peace (PfP) activities, in which Australia now takes part on a select basis.

In parallel, Australia has worked more closely with NATO since 2006 when it provided a task force as a contribution to the Dutch Provincial Reconstruction Team in Oruzgan Province in Afghanistan. Since these forces serve as part of NATO's ISAF operation, ADF liaison officers are embedded in ISAF and NATO headquarters, and Australian representatives participate in NATO's political/strategic discussions on Afghanistan at the ambassadorial and ministerial level.

Australia's Asia-Pacific Focus

And yet, increasing cooperation and joint operations in Afghanistan are not necessarily indicative of the potential for future cooperation between Australia and NATO. Despite the post-9/11 operations in the Middle East, stability in the immediate neighborhood and the broader Asia-Pacific region remain the dominant concern in Australian strategic thinking. Like its predecessor, the new 2009 Defense White Paper bases its strategic guidance and policy direction on a hierarchy of four strategic interests that are firmly rooted in Australia's Asia-Pacific geography:

The first strategic interest is the ability of the ADF to defend the Australian continent and its maritime approaches without relying on the combat troops of the United States. The second is to protect the internal stability and freedom of countries in Australia's neighborhood, i.e. in the South West Pacific and in Indonesia from external threat. Its third focus is the strategic stability in the Asia-Pacific, especially in South East Asia. Lastly, only its fourth and final strategic objective concerns contributing to world order, including in the Greater Middle East, where Australia's and NATO activities are most likely to overlap.

The 2009 White Paper thus confirmed an enduring hierarchy of Australian strategic interests. Increasing concerns about the Asia-Pacific order have important ramifications for the practical relevance of NATO for Australia. Besides the ANZUS alliance with the United States, Australia has a number of other defense relationships that are more in tune with its strategic preoccupations than the Trans-Atlantic alliance. Australia maintains close cooperation with New Zealand under the ANZUS treaty and the Closer Defense Relations agreements, and New Zealand and Australian troops have deployed together to a number of operations in the South Pacific in recent years.

In South East Asia, Australia is part of the Five Powers Defense Arrangements with the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Singapore, and Malaysia, which play a useful role in maintaining defense cooperation and fostering regional stability. Important bilateral defense relations exist with Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Japan. For a nation of its size, Australia is thus interwoven into a fairly substantial set of formal defense relationships within the Asia-Pacific region, all of which, unlike NATO, are important tools to maintain the country's three strategic interests.

As Good As It Gets?

While cooperation between NATO and Australia has increased significantly at the technical, operational, and political level, proponents of a deeper and substantial partnership with Australia should not hold their breath: The total is more likely to be less, rather than more, than the sum of its parts.

Many of the new cooperation programs that were created after 9/11 will endure. Australia is likely to continue to participate in select PfP activities and other NATO events. The reason for this, however, lies not in a fundamentally deeper relationship between NATO and Australia. Rather, many of the activities fit into the established, pre-9/11 pattern of Australia's limited cooperation with NATO in mundane, technical matters, such as logistical issues, or in exchanges in specialized fields like nuclear, biological and chemical countermeasures, or the NATO Submarine Commanders' Conference.

In regards to ongoing and future participation of the ADF in NATO operations, Australia's contribution to the ISAF mission in Afghanistan is politically couched in terms of the global efforts to reduce the dangers of terrorism. But it is important to note that a significant part of its strategic rationale lies in Australia's bilateral defense relationship with the United States under the ANZUS Treaty. In the absence of a standing organization similar to NATO, the main means by which Australia has underpinned its strategic relationship with the United States in recent decades has been by making highly visible contributions to U.S. operations in the Middle East. Ultimately, Australia is thus operating in Afghanistan for reasons that lie much closer to home: ANZUS remains Australia's ultimate guarantor of defense against an existential threat, and the benefits of the close relationship with the United States in terms of access to technology, logistical support, and intelligence underpins the ADF's ability to operate independently in Australia's immediate neighborhood. Furthermore, Australia tends to participate in operations only if there is sizeable U.S. participation. While New Zealand, for example, sent ground forces to the former Yugoslavia, Australia did not. Successive Australian governments have placed tight restrictions on ADF deployments to global missions in terms of troop numbers, duration, and rules of engagement. Australia's relatively limited contribution to ISAF, especially compared with the Canadian or British ones, fits into that established pattern. Australia may well participate in future NATO operations, but since it is only likely to do so in a very restrained manner, and only if there is a sizeable U.S. participation, the scope for any practical benefit to the alliance in terms of burden-sharing is going to be very limited.

Australian decision-makers would also be reluctant to be tied to any institutionalized NATO formats that follow the logic of an "alliance of democracies." This has the potential of alienating China, with which Australia wants to maintain stable relations given its growing political, economic, and military weight. Already, the Australian government is maintaining a difficult balancing act between its strong orientation toward the ANZUS alliance and increased economic integration with Beijing. Closer political ties with NATO would only add to this complexity.

Finally, Australia has very little incentive to associate or even subsume its ANZUS-based relationship with the United States in a broader NATO framework. NATO's internal difficulties to reach consensus on Afghanistan and other issues have not escaped the attention of Australian political decision-makers. Australia has no interest whatsoever to link the future of its alliance with the United States with the success or failure in Afghanistan in the way that NATO has. But even if NATO found new resolve in Afghanistan and consensus on future policies, what matters most for Australia is the policy of the United States as a Pacific power, not as an Atlantic ally. As long as NATO has no credible strategic role in the region of greatest concern to Australia's security, NATO provides little added value to its core strategic interests.

Lessons for NATO's Future Role

For Australia, NATO is only one among a number of partners to work with when it comes to serving the country's "wider strategic interests." Tellingly, the 2009 Defence White Paper only briefly mentions the partnership with the alliance, in the same paragraph and the same terms with which it addresses cooperation with the European Union. The current status as one of NATO's "partners across the globe" without a formal institutional access serves Australia's interests well. The relationship with NATO does not rank high in strategic debate among Australian strategic decision-makers and security pundits, and Canberra does not have any desire to join the alliance as a member.

Deepening the partnership between Australia and NATO will require common core interests. Given that the rise of China, India, and other Asian nations in economic and military terms will only strengthen Australia's focus on the region, new impetus for developing the relationship must come from NATO itself. If the alliance comes to a consensus that the relationships with partners across the globe should extend significantly beyond their current scope, NATO must pay much closer attention to the partners' core strategic interests and policies, rather than simply assuming that such cooperation could be based on a general commonality of values and interests at the global level.

In the case of Australia, and the alliance's other partners in the Asia-Pacific, this would require NATO to define its own role with regards to the balance of power in the region, engage in a meaningful strategic dialogue with China, could weave closer ties to Asian regional security mechanisms, and seriously consider potential scenarios for direct engagements of NATO in the region. Only if NATO credibly extended its role into the Asia-Pacific could Australia's relationship with NATO move to a higher level of cooperation and integration. But since meaningful and deep cooperation requires meaningful and deeply shared strategic interests, it is difficult to see how and why NATO allies would agree on such a course.

Despite the superficial attraction of a truly global NATO role, it is thus more credible and attractive for NATO to maintain the current "customer approach," in which the alliance largely leaves it up to its partners to define their desired areas of cooperation. Moreover, the direct costs to the alliance of the current approach are small—in financial terms, and because it entails little commitment by the alliance to the partners. However,

the political framework of NATO's relationships based on a customer approach lacks a clear sense of purpose and strategy. If NATO wants to continue at the present level of cooperation, it needs to make the inherent limit of its ambitions explicit and clear. If it does not, mundane technical exchanges or cooperation on operations with countries like Australia will continue to elicit either a sense of lost opportunity, or of a dangerous slippery slope, and thereby perpetuate disagreements and mistrust within the alliance, with its partners, and with third countries.



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[Volume 2/2001](#)
[Volume 3/2002](#)
[Volume 4/2003](#)
[Volume 5/2004](#)
[Volume 6/2005](#)
[Volume 7/2006](#)
[Volume 8/2007](#)
[Volume 9/2008](#)
[Volume 10/2009](#)
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