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NATO, Australia and the future partnership

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NATO countries met in Bucharest just over a week ago. Tourists unlucky enough to be in the city at the time would not have enjoyed the experience. The city was locked down. Businesses were closed and residents had been encouraged to leave town for a few days. Roads were partitioned by barriers that separated the normal traffic from NATO's motorcades and vehicles. The security presence was intense.

Australian attention was fixed upon the summit by a rare event: the attendance of the Prime Minister and Defence Minister at NATO's high table. The invitations to Australian political leaders were a welcome signal that NATO intends to take its partners more seriously. But after the summit, it is obvious that both Australia and NATO have to think harder about what their 'partnership' means. NATO—its 60th anniversary approaching next year—seems divided over its own grand strategy, and confused about where the partnerships fit in the greater scheme of things.

NATO always was the Western Cold War alliance most highly adapted to its environment. With its plethora of committees and interlocking mechanisms for military cooperation, it was specifically built to offset Soviet power in Europe. Such highly adapted structures usually don't cope well with sudden and dramatic changes in their environment. Adaptation costs are high. But since the end of the Cold War, NATO has attempted two major strategic initiatives. The first initiative has been a strategy of enlargement, offering the warm, inclusive embrace of membership to the struggling democracies in Eastern Europe. The second initiative has been a strategy of engagement, a willingness to use the alliance's assets 'out of area' as a contribution to wider interests in global stability.

Both initiatives are under pressure. Enlargement faltered in Bucharest, with only two of five potential candidates granted admission to the alliance. And engagement out of area—symbolised by the NATO commitment to the mission in Afghanistan—drew only mixed support. Yet again NATO's secretary-general called for the lifting of caveats that limit the operational roles of many national contingents, but without substantial effect.

Australia is an important partner for this evolving NATO. It brings to the relationship both competent military forces and a willingness to deploy them to distant theatres. Australians have seen their own alliance, ANZUS, head down a similar path of out of area engagement, as the alliance moved under the Howard Government from being a regional enterprise to more

of a global one. That's how we met up with NATO. Two regional alliances on opposite sides of the world ended up in Afghanistan together, and realised they had interests in common and might increasingly be pursuing those interests in the same geographic space.

In essence, therefore, the concept of partnership has arisen from two intersecting strategies of engagement. But when Europeans think about partnerships, they frequently lump them together with the first NATO strategy, the strategy of enlargement. They tend therefore to think about their partners in much the same way they think about aspiring members of their alliance. This is an unhelpful conflation. Membership applicants can be assigned membership action plans, and encouraged to jump through a series of hoops to make them prove their fitness for NATO inclusion. But partners aren't like that: Japan, and Australia and South Korea, for example, must be approached as equals.

Moreover, NATO's Asian partners are not looking for membership. Australia already has its own alliance relationship with the United States. So too do Japan and South Korea. No serious consideration is given in Canberra to the option of transforming all the Cold War Western alliances into one mega-alliance, under the NATO name.

Some political leaders in NATO countries speak ambitiously of making the alliance the dominant military organisation on the Eurasian continent. Such visions are still only a gleam in the eye; it is far from certain as yet what role most NATO countries might want to play in Asia. Still, Australia should be cautious about any proposal for a significantly bigger NATO role in the Asian theatre. The Asian security environment is complex and nuanced. It has never been especially accepting of multilateral alliance structures, let alone of a Western-dominated, Eurocentric alliance structure that attempted to treat Eurasia as one strategic entity.

It is natural that European countries will take a greater strategic interest in Asia as the world's economic engines come to rely more heavily on Asian dynamism. Just as Australia was strategically interested in Europe when Europe was central to global stability, European countries are increasingly looking abroad in their search for global strategic stability. But here NATO countries are torn, because they simultaneously fear that the growing importance of the partnership arrangements suggests a waning US interest in Europe itself, and a dilution of Europe's strategic *gravitas*. It is not only in Australia that a debate is occurring about the proper priority to be given to expeditionary missions as opposed to more local ones.

All that would suggest that NATO and its partners need to do more work on partnership arrangements. In part, they need to talk more about what partnerships actually mean. At the practical, operational end of the spectrum, 'partnership' simply means that we should consult more and that we should work to become more interoperable when our forces overlap. But at the other end of the spectrum lies a veritable can of worms. What is NATO's grand strategy for the 21st century? What role can it play in Asia? Will all the NATO countries be involved in expeditionary missions or are we increasingly seeing the alliance fracture into a two-tier organisation? What new structures might be necessary to augment existing arrangements? Do partners intend to 'consume' NATO security rather than merely complement it?

At this high-end level of partnership, we have to keep our own interests firmly in mind. Australia wants a stable Asia, and not merely an Asia where everyone hedges against potential threats. It hopes to get that stable Asia by growing opportunities for the Asian great powers to work more together in the field of security cooperation. It is wrong to think that the Asian security order can be determined by outsiders. We are past that time. Asian countries must find it within themselves to build a stable regional security system, where responsibility for public goods doesn't rest solely with Washington. In short, NATO's partnerships in Asia have to support, not slow, a transition to a regional security order where the Asian great powers carry more of the weight.

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