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# Family Reunion

NATO and Australia

Bertil Wenger/Justin Burke

Nobody in Canberra wants or expects Article 5-style security guarantees from NATO. However, located in a region faced with China's increasing expansionism, Australia could greatly benefit from a closer partnership because alliances are what China fears most.

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## Introduction

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was unquestioned in Australia that Europe's wars were Australia's wars as well. But in a seminal moment in 1942, Prime Minister John Curtin openly defied British Prime Minister Winston Churchill's authority over the Australian Seventh Division and ordered them to return to the homeland. This was instrumental in Australia switching its principal security relationship from the United Kingdom to the United States. In the ensuing Cold War, Australia and NATO's European members – while sharing a powerful ally in the US – had quite different experiences and little contact.

But like distant family members brought together by tragedy, it was the war in Afghanistan that brought Australia and NATO into sustained contact for the first time. In present times, the growing risks posed by a revisionist China across the Indo-Pacific region, and its potential consequences for an interconnected world, are forging an even deeper partnership between Australia and NATO.

NATO certainly has its sceptics – and indeed critics – in Australia. Nobody is, in fact, offering or asking for something equivalent to NATO's Article 5 security guarantees. Short of that, the growing partnership is broadly seen as consistent with Australia's other alliances, beneficial in preserving peace. And with continued engagement, and some foresight and creativity, it could have the potential to be immensely valuable in a crisis.

## History of Australia and NATO

Despite anomalous examples such as the Royal Australian Air Force's No. 78 Wing based in Malta

in the early 1950s, which participated in many NATO exercises in the Mediterranean, the Middle East and Central Europe, “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”, according to Stephan Frühling.<sup>1</sup>

Australia's deployment of special forces to Afghanistan in 2005 became the catalyst for a relationship with NATO. Australia became a “contact country” in 2006, an informal status which allowed participation in selected “Partnership for Peace” activities. But by 2007, issues such as Australia's lack of access to NATO planning documents were beginning to chafe. “It might be that we were getting most of it indirectly through our friends and allies in the United States, but it made no sense to me that we were sending our young people potentially to die in the battleground in Afghanistan, and yet we weren't being given a seat at the planning table”, said then Defence Minister Joel Fitzgibbon.<sup>2</sup>

By 2012, the Australia-NATO relationship had progressed to a “Joint Political Declaration” which included the appointment of an Australian Ambassador to NATO (in practice, triple-hatted as Ambassador to Belgium and to the European Union as well). This was followed by an “Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme” in 2013, which has been further promoted to a “NATO-Australia Individually Tailored Partnership Programme 2023–2026”. Further, Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has attended NATO summits since Madrid in 2022 alongside the heads of government from the other so-called Asia-Pacific 4 (AP4) of Japan, the Republic of Korea and New Zealand.

## Perceptions of NATO

There is little indication of what the Australian public think about NATO. The Lowy Institute has polled citizens on their perceptions of foreign countries, leaders and issues annually since 2005, but never once directly or indirectly mentioned NATO, perhaps implicitly concluding that the organisation is peripheral to the Australian public's awareness.

### **NATO has been the subject of elite debate, sometimes in strongly vitriolic terms.**

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NATO has, however, been the subject of elite debate, sometimes in strongly vitriolic terms, and not aligning neatly with party politics more generally. Last year, former Prime Minister Paul Keating, who led a Labour government in the early 1990s, described NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg a “supreme fool”, adding: “Stoltenberg by instinct and by policy, is simply an accident on its way to happen.”<sup>3</sup> Specifically, Mr Keating was criticising the proposed opening of a liaison office in Tokyo ahead of the present-day Labour Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s trip to the NATO Vilnius summit. “The Europeans have been fighting each other for the better part of 300 years, including giving the rest of us two World Wars in the last 100”, he said. “Exporting that malicious poison to Asia would be akin to Asia welcoming the plague upon itself. With all of Asia’s recent development amid its long and latent poverty, that promise would be compromised by having anything to do with the militarism of Europe – and militarism egged on by the United States.”<sup>4</sup> His comments can

be contextualised as representative of an older generation of progressive politicians, whose world view was shaped by a closer proximity to the World Wars and a sense in which Australian blood had been repeatedly spilled on European battlefields – sometimes wantonly – due to



RIMPAC: Australian, Mexican, Canadian and US navy divers are seen participating in the 2022 edition of the Rim of the Pacific maritime warfare exercise. The United States is central to Australia's security alliances.  
Photo: © U.S. Navy, Zuma Press, picture alliance.

excessive deference and disconnected from Australia's own national interests.

A number of voices from the conservative side of politics agreed with the substance of Mr Keating's points, if not his tone. Former High

Commissioner to the United Kingdom, Liberal Senator and Federal Attorney-General George Brandis wrote that while greater strategic integration was a necessary and inevitable development, it is very different from expanding NATO's "coverage" to the region; the most



likely effect of which, he argued, would be to strengthen China's hand with non-aligned countries such as India and Indonesia.<sup>5</sup>

This conflation of any form of NATO cooperation with Article 5 is reductive, and implicitly promotes the notion repeated by Russian propagandists that NATO's mutual defence clauses are somehow provocations. Other Australian analysts have emphasised that no one is suggesting Article 5-style security guarantees in the Indo-Pacific, and this is distracting from the important NATO goal of signalling to China that European nations will not be indifferent to Chinese use of force in Taiwan or elsewhere.<sup>6</sup>

For his part, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese told the Vilnius Summit that Australia was betting on partnerships that promote stability in the world. "Whilst [NATO's] focus is obviously on the north Atlantic and Europe, many of the principles are applicable globally. The Russian invasion of Ukraine is a reminder that something that happens in one part of the world affects everywhere in the world," adding Stoltenberg was a "friend of Australia".<sup>7</sup> Mr Albanese's attendance at Vilnius, and Madrid the previous year, and probable attendance at the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary summit in Washington D.C. this year, have demonstrated a growing commitment to this partnership.

## Australia and the US have fought alongside each other in every major war since 1918.

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Australia is cognisant that beyond the AP4, liberal democratic Western European norms are not evenly observed across the Indo-Pacific region, and views on NATO vary. Specifically, nations whose identity is inextricably linked to liberation from European colonialism would not necessarily see NATO as unalloyed friend. Indeed, regrettably, many of the citizens of these nations are receptive to Chinese government narratives portraying NATO as belligerent, foreign and unwelcome in the region.

## Australia's Alliances

Australia's most crucial alliance is ANZUS, a treaty signed between Australia, New Zealand and the United States in 1951. While New Zealand was suspended for refusing port access to nuclear-powered or -armed US naval vessels in the mid-1980s, Australia and the US remain committed to a security assurance known as "Article III": "The Parties will consult together whenever in the opinion of any of them the territorial integrity, political independence or security of any of the Parties is threatened in the Pacific."<sup>8</sup>

Despite Australia and the US fighting alongside each other in every major war since 1918 – colloquially known as the "100 years of mateship" – it was only after the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001 that the then Prime Minister John Howard formally invoked the treaty for the first time.

The treaty relationship is marked by annual meetings between each nation's Defence and Foreign Ministers – AUSMIN – held alternately in the US and Australia, a high rate of military exercises from the US-run maritime warfare exercise Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) to the biennial joint-services "Talisman Sabre" exercise, a range of jointly run military intelligence facilities such as Pine Gap and, for the last decade, a rotational detachment of Marines based in Darwin.

In annual surveys by the Lowy Institute, high levels of public support for Australia's alliance with the United States have been consistent across the last two decades, with more than 80 per cent agreeing that the alliance is either very or fairly important.<sup>9</sup>

The defining similarities of ANZUS and NATO are the centrality of the US, and also the longevity of both alliances by historical standards.<sup>10</sup> To European observers, the geographical limits of this assurance will suggest similarities to NATO's Article 6, whereas the crucial word "consult" clearly falls far short of the guarantees in NATO's Article 5. "Australia was quite aware that its alliance with the United States was less

institutionalized, less comprehensive and arguably less reliable than was NATO,” writes Stephan Frühling.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, it has been argued that ANZUS has attracted far less drama than NATO. “Compared to the stormy seas of NATO, for instance, where there seems to have been a crisis almost every year, ANZUS has mostly been as placid as a mill pond”, according to Australian scholar Coral Bell.<sup>12</sup>

Arguably of equal importance is Australia’s membership of the longstanding intelligence alliance, the Five Eyes (FVEY), which also includes the US, the United Kingdom, Canada and New Zealand. It is a simultaneously well-known yet understudied compact.

In more recent times, Australia has been pursuing key unilateral security agreements. AUKUS is a trilateral security partnership announced in 2021 between Australia, the UK and the US, to enable the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines for the Australian Navy and to collectively pursue a suite of advanced defence technologies from hypersonic missiles to quantum computing. It made global headlines, not least because it replaced a troubled submarine contract with the French company Naval, but also due to its leader-level political endorsement from the three nations, and the unmistakable message it sent to China, which at that time was conducting a significant campaign of economic coercion against Australia. Since then, significant progress has been made, particularly in US congressional approval for the transfer of three Virginia Class submarines (two in-service and one new) to Australia in the early 2030s. But the challenges involved in nuclear custodianship, workforce development and infrastructure are mammoth.

AUKUS is not a new treaty, as it is often mistakenly described, nor does it feature mutual defence obligations. But it is true to say that Australia’s treaties – ANZUS, FVEY and even Australia’s longstanding constitutional links with the UK – have all contributed to the deep trust which has made cooperation under AUKUS possible. Nonetheless, some US politicians have described

AUKUS as the start of NATO’s “expansion” in the Indo-Pacific region, including Senator Tammy Duckworth, a member of the influential Senate Armed Service Committee, who said NATO’s “expansion” “had already started [given] our successful AUKUS agreement between the UK, Australia and the United States”.<sup>13</sup> This is probably only true in the most general sense.

### **While it has no explicit security guarantees, QUAD is a response to China’s belligerent behaviour in the region.**

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The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), also including Japan, India and the US, is a very noteworthy development. Its origins are the maritime cooperation forged during the Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004, and while it went into hiatus between 2008 and 2017 due to Australian and to some degree Indian reluctance, it has been revived (sometimes called Quad 2.0) and elevated to leader level summits and annual multilateral naval exercises “Malabar”.

In stark contrast to NATO, it is not an alliance and features no founding documents, headquarters, secretariat or fixed schedule. (A “vision statement” was published last year.) It certainly has no explicit security guarantees between the participants. It is, however, a flexible tool for responding to China’s growing power and belligerent behaviour in the region; the late former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe called it a “democratic Asian security diamond” in response to Chinese “coercion”, implying it is a group which could harden under external pressure.<sup>14</sup>

In recognition of India’s longstanding non-aligned foreign policy, the Quad has engaged in more non-traditional security topics such as climate change as well as critical and emerging technologies, and “public goods” such as vaccine coordination. Unsurprisingly, it has attracted a

great deal of criticism from China for being an “Asian NATO”. However, many historians point to the failure of the anti-communist collective defence pact, Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) 1944 to 1977, which was modelled on NATO, as an example of how such notions are doomed to fail in this highly diverse region.

There is no conceptual conflict between Australia’s US-centric defence treaties, intelligence sharing, advanced technology and unilateral democratic cooperation, and increased partnership with NATO. Mutual security guarantees would be a different matter. The synergies and opportunities will be discussed below.

### What Does Australia Expect of NATO?

In practical ways, Australia has a lot to gain from its growing partnership with NATO. There are challenges that Australia may face in its alliance management where NATO has long-term, day-to-day experience: joint allied strategic commands, joint defence planning processes and force generation processes, to name a few. And beyond Brussels, there is great potential in Australian engagement at relevant NATO Centres of Excellence for example.

These practical matters could yield strategic benefits. Some have argued that such patterns of



Alliances are what they fear most: China’s representative to the UN in Vienna giving a press conference on the AUKUS security partnership alongside his Russian counterpart. Beijing has fiercely criticised anything resembling NATO in the Indo-Pacific. Photo: © Guo Chen, Xinhua, picture alliance.

cooperation and deep involvement will enhance Australia's ability to know what to ask for, and whom to ask about it in NATO. For example, during a time of conflict in the Taiwan Strait, South China Sea or East China Sea, NATO maritime "backfilling" in the Western Indian Ocean could be beneficial. Security crises can shift seemingly immovable political consensus within NATO, from which agile partners can benefit. For example, there is some ambiguity amongst French scholars about whether Article 5 includes French territory such as New Caledonia. As Prime Minister Howard's invocation of the ANZUS treaty showed, there can be reinterpretation of certain aspects in time of crisis. In a Pacific Islands security contingency, even the ambiguity of this status could be a helpful deterrent.

### **The Russian invasion of Ukraine has awakened many to the interrelatedness of the Indo-Pacific and European theatres.**

In a strategic sense, as Prime Minister Albanese said, Australia values NATO as a partner for stability. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has awakened many to the interrelatedness of the Indo-Pacific and European theatres. That means that European nations individually, and in some cases as the European Union, and in other cases as NATO, have a very welcome role to play in signalling to China that the rules-based international order and open sea lines of communication in the Indo-Pacific are key interests for Europe, too.

The fact that this intention has been sustained during the Russian invasion of Ukraine is praiseworthy. Similarly, Australia has played a modest role in the provision of aid, military equipment and military training to Ukraine in order to signal its commitment to freedom from coercion. The Australian assumption that this supportive engagement will result in reciprocity from NATO member countries, should the security

environment deteriorate in the Indo-Pacific, must be interpreted as more than just an undertone.

After a certain point, however, increased NATO presence in the Indo-Pacific inevitably means resources being diverted from the European theatres. To the extent that many European NATO members are not yet spending the required two per cent of GDP on defence (Australia is approaching 1.9 per cent), this obliges greater involvement and investment from the United States, which could otherwise be deployed in the Indo-Pacific. As the late Australian Rear-Admiral James Goldrick wrote, "Australia welcomes European powers having an active role in the Indo-Pacific and regular deployments of European naval forces in the region, but a more coherent geostrategic approach would see Europe focus – and increase – its naval and military efforts on Europe, while the United States and other Indo-Pacific powers continue to reorganise to balance China."<sup>15</sup> That is, the more responsibility Europeans take for their own defence, the better it will be for Australia.

### **Conclusion**

It might surprise Europeans that Australia's relationship with NATO is only a relatively recent phenomenon. Of course, there have been many non-NATO military contact points over the years; not least the Australian-led INTERFET mission to stabilise East Timor 1999 to 2000, which saw contributions from many European militaries. Moreover, the significant shared values of liberal democracies have perhaps made the formal connection something easy to overlook, but at the same time easy in some respects to remedy.

That is not to discount the challenges Australia faces in engaging and understanding NATO, an organisation like no other. But the benefits of doing so successfully could be immense.

And yet for Australia it must be an "and" not an "or". That is, it can never replace Australia's multifaceted security relationship with the US (ANZUS, FVEY, AUKUS and through the QUAD),





nor should it come at the cost of understanding and engaging with Australia's immediate region. As Sam Roggeveen correctly points out in his recent book<sup>16</sup>, no other nation holds greater significance for Australia's ultimate defence than Indonesia, a young democracy of nearly 275 million people and the world's largest Muslim nation, and an archipelago through which any adversary would need to traverse to threaten Australia.

Australia may also consider how a no-holds-barred debate about NATO and ad-hominem attacks on its personnel might be interpreted by its European friends. Certainly, Australia should have a clear view of its historical experience and interests. But a nation at ease with its heritage and geographical location – its European settlement and multi-ethnic future – should be able to more confidently engage with nations of all types and without rancour.

It is worth reemphasising that no one can face the epochal challenge of China's rise without friends and allies. Indeed, if China's vociferous attacks on anything resembling NATO in the Indo-Pacific are anything to go by, it is alliances they fear the most, preferring to dominate smaller nations bilaterally. "China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact", said senior diplomat Yang Jiechi in July 2010.<sup>17</sup> In this context, Australia's partnership and cooperation with NATO is something to be cherished.

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