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EXPANDING NATO: AN ORGANISATION SEARCHING FOR THE WRONG MISSIONS

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THE idea that the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) might evolve into a security organisation with a global mission has been debated on occasions ever since the Berlin Wall fell. It is an idea that has re-emerged, with Australia and Japan, in particular, proposed to be enmeshed in the NATO network of partnerships.

In the first place, NATO has always been regarded, at least in American strategic circles, as almost an ideal case of an alliance structure providing a framework for strategic partnership. During the Cold War, the United States had attempted to create similar alliance structures – in this part of the world, as seen in the South East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO). That SEATO comprised only two member states that were genuinely part of Southeast Asia was merely one of the internal contradictions that eventually spelt its demise.

So how likely is the success of this new idea of a network of strategic partnerships working in tandem to enhance global security? How viable is this idea that NATO might eventually evolve into a network of global partnerships?

A Stillborn idea?

From a purely military standpoint, this is a stillborn idea, even without considering the political contradictions within it – such as the fact that Australia and Japan may share strategic interests with the United States, but they have little in common between themselves.

In the first place, neither Japan nor Australia has the military capacity to intervene in any crisis situation for an extended period of time. Both countries do have the necessary depth of military resources to be able to do so. To some extent this has to do with shrinking manpower resources – in Japan's case a function of its declining birth rates, and in Australia's case the inability of the military sector to compete with the private sector in attracting sufficient talent into its ranks. This has made for military organisations that are manpower-light.

It is no accident that both Australia and Japan are seeking to engage with the so-called revolution in military affairs – sometimes also referred to as military transformation – that came to prominence in the aftermath of Operation Desert Storm in 1991, and apparently validated in the subsequent campaigns in Bosnia and Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq. Of course, given the heavy emphasis of this military transformation process on sophisticated technological skills and capabilities, both countries are in the Asia Pacific and probably the

best placed to engage with this process. Nevertheless, for both countries, shrinking manpower resources has been a dominant concern driving their respective military transformation agendas.

Nor does either country have the necessary hardware to allow them to intervene in regional crises at distance. That NATO forces have been deployed in theatres of operation far away from Europe is the result of primarily United States military lift capacities. Most of the European armed forces do not have the heavy lift capacity to allow them to intervene, absent the United States, in any crisis outside of Europe. The same condition applies in the case of Australia and Japan. In both armed forces, there is insufficient numbers of long-range heavy lift, either in air or naval platforms, which would allow them to intervene in any crisis at distance from their respective shores, except for very short-term deployments. Military deployments at distance for a period any longer than a few weeks become an almost insurmountable problem for both Asia Pacific powers.

Beating the constraints

The only way by which both states could hypothetically engage in a military intervention of such nature would be in partnership with the United States. American participation, however, is increasingly something that no one can take for granted any longer. The recently-concluded 2006 Quadrennial Defence Review (QDR) has spelt out a vision of the United States military where there will be increasing emphasis on special operations capabilities – extremely useful in a variety of low-intensity military operations, but of dubious value to crisis interventions. Increasing emphasis in this QDR is placed on combat platforms. But given the likelihood of further budget cuts, this will mean a likely reduction in non-combat platforms such as heavy air and sea lift capabilities. All this results in a United States military that will be increasingly incapable of intervening in more than two crises widely separated. Given the increasing likelihood of a prolonged American deployment in Iraq and Afghanistan, this does not portend well for the ability of United States military interventions in the Asia Pacific.

Thirdly, a key principle of military actions has always been focus, or maintenance on the aims. Expanding NATO's sphere of operations may seem like a good idea, but may also result in a dilution of its core military competencies. Military interventions in far-off locales is a difficult operation, demanding a wide array of skills such as language competencies, cultural awareness and sensitivities, in-depth knowledge of local political and social conditions. All of these are important skill sets determining success in military interventions, but which are notoriously difficult and time-consuming to acquire and master.

In other words, even if NATO members have the necessary depth of manpower resources and the heavy long-range lift to allow them to participate in interventions in the Asia Pacific, their forces will have to acquire all the skill sets to avoid any failure. Time however may not allow them to acquire these skill sets -- not without jettisoning existing skill sets, or sacrificing resources. To do so may result in NATO forces losing their vital advantages in the missions they are currently either training for or deployed in.

Finally, by expanding the network of NATO partnerships, this may introduce strategic mismatches that can undermine the strategic coherence of the organisation. The strategic interests of NATO and United States allies in the Asia Pacific do not necessarily converge. Such a proposed network may ultimately result in an organisation, loosely defined as a result of such expansion, which becomes further riven by internal disputes over strategic interests

and objectives. This could ultimately undermine the ability of NATO to function effectively as a strategic entity that has, at least thus far, a more or less coherent strategic vision. A NATO that cannot function effectively in its area of interest does no one any favours. Nor does a widened NATO that loses its focus and its military coherence.

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