

## **Our affair with NATO based on insecurity**

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For decades during the Cold War, a tiny but tenacious minority of Australians longed for us to join the Northern Atlantic Treaty Organisation. Now it almost seems to be happening.

Last month, Prime Minister Julia Gillard joined NATO leaders at their summit meeting in Chicago. Then this month she welcomed NATO secretary-general Anders Fogh Rasmussen to Canberra to sign a joint political declaration between Australia and NATO. We both appear to be taking one another very seriously. But what does it really mean? Is this the start of a new era in Australia's strategic diplomacy, or the last dying embers of Europe's aspirations for global influence?

Alas, the evidence overwhelmingly favours the second of these interpretations. The speed-dating infatuation between Australia and NATO is just one more sign of Europe's existential angst, and of our strategic distraction, in the face of the perplexing power politics of the Asian century.

From the NATO side, this is very much a European thing. It started in Afghanistan. When America rushed into Iraq, NATO found itself unexpectedly in charge of the Western stabilisation mission in Afghanistan, and as Australia's commitment there grew we were drawn more closely into contact with them.

But although the NATO-led effort in Afghanistan is now winding down, both Canberra and Brussels seem determined that the links forged there should continue to grow, as NATO seeks some kind of world role.

This is still relatively new. Looking beyond Europe is quite at odds with NATO's origins. It was arguably the most successful alliance in history because it focused rigorously on one core task — the collective defence of western Europe from the Soviet Union.

The heart of NATO is the solemn commitment in Article 5 of the NATO treaty, binding every member to come to the defence of every other member. "An attack on one is an attack on all," the treaty says. Throughout the Cold War that commitment remained highly credible. No one on either side really doubted that had the Soviet tanks pushed west, the whole of western Europe, with America, would have pushed back together.

Since the end of the Cold War, however, things have become more complex. Eager to bring eastern Europe into the Western fold, NATO welcomed new members all the way up to — and even across — the borders of the former Soviet Union. That is fine as long as Europe remains at peace.

But NATO's eastward march means that Article 5 now commits France, Britain and America to go to war with Russia if the Kremlin ever takes it into its head to reassert its rule over, say, the Baltic states. That is a big ask.

NATO therefore faces a big but largely unacknowledged strategic problem at home in Europe. Russia remains formidably armed and deeply dissatisfied with the post-Cold War, post-Soviet order in eastern Europe. NATO has pledged to uphold that order, if necessary at the cost of war, even nuclear war, with Russia. NATO's new eastern members — the ones that used to be Soviet territories or satellites — worry about this all the time.

The others — those further from Russia — try to pretend that this risk is not there, and talk instead about new threats such as cyber war and piracy, and about Europe's leadership role in the wider world beyond the continent.

For NATO's western European members, the question of the alliance's global role has become central to the vexed question of Europe's identity.

France and Britain still see themselves individually as world powers, and many of the others are still wedded to a vision of Europe as a major force in the world. They see a strong NATO security role beyond Europe as a key element of Europe's global influence.

This brings them to Asia. Our European cousins understand that something big is happening in Asia, but may not understand just how big.

They can see that China's rise is reshaping the strategic landscape in the world's fastest-growing region, and they want to play a part in deciding how Asia evolves and what it means for the rest of the world. They see Australia as a player in the new Asian order, and they hope a close connection with Australia will help deal them into the Asian game.

But it won't work. What's happening in Asia is too big for Europe to have any influence over, with or without Australia's help.

Europe remains remarkable for its economic scale, technology, political cohesion and cultural riches, but in the 21st century it has no capacity to influence strategic or political affairs in Asia. Today, and increasingly in the future, there is simply too much power in Asia itself for faraway Europe to have any impact.

That means Europe, and NATO, is irrelevant to the key issues in Australia's strategic future. So why is Canberra so keen on building NATO links now that our co-operation in Afghanistan is fading into history?

One obvious reason is that Australian political leaders welcome yet another opportunity to be seen mixing with world leaders, regardless of whether they have anything serious to say to one another. This motive is not to be underestimated, but I do not think it tells the whole story.

As Asia's power grows, Australia is clinging more tightly to its old friends in America. But perhaps we are also casting further back, and seeking again the comforting support of Europe as we face a newly powerful and still frighteningly unfamiliar Asia.

The Europeans like to imagine they still have a role to play in Asia, upholding the values we share with them as universal precepts for all to follow. We in Australia perhaps like to imagine they are right.

If so, we are both deluded. The difference is that for the Europeans this delusion is relatively harmless, but for us it may be fatal. The plain fact is that, in the Asian century, Australia will have to make its own way in Asia. It is not clear whether America can help us, but it is quite certain that Europe cannot.

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