NATO’s new Strategic Concept and issues for Australia

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Introduction

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) finds itself at a strategic crossroads, as it moves to the next stage in development of its strategic outlook for the forthcoming decade. From a trans-Atlantic military alliance, formed in 1949 under United States (US) leadership to deter an attack from the Soviet Union during the Cold War, NATO has evolved into a collective security mechanism that now includes post-Communist states. Over the past decade, NATO embarked on a process of structural and operational reforms towards increasing its political and military capabilities to respond to challenges from state and non-state actors, and more recently, in cyber-space. Contrary to what many analysts predicted at the end of the Cold War NATO has not become redundant. Currently, its key operations—to which Australia also contributes—are the International Stabilisation Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan (authorised by the United Nations), and its anti-piracy mission, *Operation Ocean Shield*, in the Horn of Africa.

The 24th NATO Summit in Lisbon on 19–20 November 2010 was described by the NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen as ‘the most important summit in NATO’s history’. Twenty-eight Heads of State/Government—including Australia’s closest military allies, the US and the United Kingdom (UK)—have endorsed NATO’s new Strategic Concept, which is NATO’s core strategic and operational document. Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard and Defence Minister Stephen Smith attended the Lisbon Summit, the outcomes of which will have long-reaching implications for NATO and its field missions.

Amongst other things (such as providing guidance to NATO members on defence and capabilities reform), the new Strategic Concept extends the content and depth of the Alliance’s formal and informal exchanges with partner countries and institutions worldwide. These include former geopolitical ‘adversaries’, such as Russia; organisations such as the United Nations (UN) and the

1. NATO members currently comprise: 21 (out of 27) EU member countries (including Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, and United Kingdom), Albania, Canada, Croatia, Iceland, Norway, Turkey, and the United States of America. NATO is also referred to as ‘the Alliance’.
5. The previous two Strategic Concepts were published in 1991 and 1999.
European Union (EU); and global partners such as Australia, Japan, Republic of Korea and New Zealand.  

The background note serves to highlight the key issues arising for Australia in NATO’s new Strategic Concept. It does not cover issues such as criticisms of the new Strategic Concept, international commentary, or non-NATO views of the world.

**NATO’s new Strategic Concept: rationale and key issues**

At the 23rd NATO Summit in Strasbourg/Kehl in April 2009, Heads of State/Government tasked the Secretary-General (who was Jaap de Hoop Scheffer until 1 August 2009) with crafting a new Strategic Concept for the Alliance. The Secretary-General appointed a group of 12 experts, chaired by the former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, to facilitate the process. The experts report, as it became known, was delivered on 17 May 2010 after a period of consultation with political and military leaders, academics, think-tanks and civil society groups. This report provided the NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen (the former Prime Minister of Denmark) with a framework for his final draft of the Strategic Concept which was adopted at the Lisbon Summit on 19 November 2010.

**Rationale**

The reasons for crafting the new Security Concept are multiple. It represents a reaction to new developments within the organisation and international environment, as well as an evolution in the Alliance’s strategic thinking towards delivering more sophisticated and coordinated responses to an array of challenges which NATO and its allies are likely to face over the next decade.

The experts report, *NATO 2020: assured security; dynamic engagement*, highlights that NATO members felt that the 1999 Security Concept was becoming outdated in the face of ‘unconventional challenges’ from transnational terrorist networks, undercover proliferation of weapons of mass

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destruction by state and non-state groups, and cyber-attacks. This perception was only heightened following the terrorist attacks on the US on 11 September 2001. The Iraq War in 2003, which put some NATO allies at odds with each other (such as Germany and France on the one hand, and the UK and the US on the other), also showed that internal disunity has threatened to weaken the Alliance.

Furthermore, it was also felt that a new blueprint for the Alliance was needed to encourage a closer alignment of defence and capabilities structures in member countries. Another nine states have joined NATO since its 50th anniversary Summit in Washington on 24 April 1999, at which the previous Strategic Concept was adopted. In 2009, France also rejoined NATO’s integrated military structures (from which it had been absent since 1966). The changed structural conditions within NATO and the perception of external threats warranted, therefore, a new strategic doctrine for the next decade.

The experts report describes the new Security Concept as a ‘renewal of vows’ on behalf of each NATO member state towards a stronger collective resolve (or political will) to tackle ‘conventional and unconventional threats’ to members’ security, most of which are now found outside their borders. In the geo-political landscape of the 21st century, the report identifies global and region-specific threats, including—in the Asia Pacific region—the challenge of ongoing India-Pakistan rivalry, and the tense security situation on the Korean Peninsula. In the Middle East, which lies within Australia’s key strategic interests, the report identifies three major challenges for regional security: ongoing extremist violence; unresolved Arab-Israeli tensions, and anxieties surrounding the controversial Iranian nuclear program.

The report concludes that the three most probable threats to the Alliance over the next decade are likely to be a ballistic missile strike, terrorist attacks, or a cyber-attack. Other highlighted challenges include disruptions to maritime and energy supply lines, financial crises and environmental disasters. All of these concerns are shared by Australia, albeit to various degrees, as evidenced by the analysis found in foreign policy documents of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australian parliamentary debates, and think-tanks such as the Lowy Institute for International Policy, or the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI).

13. The defence spending by NATO members constitutes over 65 per cent of the world’s defence spending today.
Key issues

The new Strategic Concept identifies three core tasks for the Alliance over the next decade:

- collective defence and deterrence—this refers to a traditional re-affirmation of honouring Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, according to which an attack against one member state is regarded as an attack on all, and, therefore, warrants a collective response; and deterrence with a mix of nuclear and conventional forces

- crisis management—this includes resorting to political and military tools to comprehensively respond to crises before, during and after their occurrence, and

- cooperative security—this refers to international partnerships of the Alliance with other countries and institutions; the contribution of the Alliance to non-proliferation and disarmament, and to keeping the membership of the Alliance open to ‘all European democracies that meet NATO’s standards’. The boundaries of Europe, however, are not clearly defined.

In addition to these core tasks, the new Strategic Concept touches upon the following issues:

- improving NATO’s relations with Russia by fostering closer cooperation on issues such as nuclear disarmament, arms control, counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics and counter-piracy efforts

- NATO’s nuclear- and arms control policy, and

- deepening of political dialogue and strategic discussions with partners from across the globe, including in the Gulf region.

Although the Strategic Concept does not single out any particular country in East Asia (it is less specific than the experts report), it offers an overarching strategic framework and a political consensus towards renewing the Alliance to meet current and future challenges—including in the Asia Pacific region. The call to identify and train civilian specialists for rapid deployment on selected missions represent an innovation in a strategic document, although in the field operations this has been occurring already.

The document’s out-of-area focus (such as in the area of international conflict management through a comprehensive security approach in the Afghanistan mission) and forward defence planning might have direct implications for Australian involvement in and support for NATO’s field operations.


Australia’s recent engagement with NATO

Australia is not part of NATO’s formal partnership structures. In NATO jargon, Australia is referred to as a ‘partner across the globe’ or a ‘Contact country’ which, alongside Japan, the Republic of Korea and New Zealand, shares a similar strategic outlook to the Alliance and espouses key Alliance values. In 1998, NATO established ‘a set of general guidelines on relations with Contact Countries, which does not allow for a formal institutionalisation of relations, but reflects the desire by both partners to increase bilateral cooperation’.22

Successive Australian Governments have supported Australia’s pragmatic collaboration arrangements with NATO, in particular following the terrorist attacks on the US in September 2001. Under the Howard Government, high-level political and military visits and exchanges resulted in closer engagement between Australia and NATO. Alexander Downer became the first Australian Foreign Minister to address the North Atlantic Council, first in 2004, and then again in 2006.24

In 2005, the NATO Secretary-General visited Australia. At a joint press conference on 1 April 2005 between the then NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer and the then Defence Minister Robert Hill and Foreign Minister Downer, the Australian Government announced the establishment of a military advisor’s post in Brussels to liaise with NATO, in the first instance with NATO’s Terrorist Threat Intelligence Unit. Australia and NATO also announced the signing of an agreement on the exchange of classified information, paving the way for greater cooperation. A National Interest

20. These include the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, the Partnership for Peace, the Mediterranean Dialogue, and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative.
22. NATO, ‘NATO’s relations with Contact Countries: evolution of relations’, viewed 1 December 2010, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/SID-80A0CD64-5785A341/natolive/topics_49188.htm#evolution
Analysis on this agreement was tabled in the Australian Parliament on 26 November 2008.\(^ {26}\) The Joint Standing Committee on Treaties published a report on it the same day.\(^ {27}\)

Closer relations between NATO and Australia in recent years were also facilitated by NATO’s internal processes. As the Australian embassy in Brussels noted:

> The decision by the NATO Riga Summit in November 2006 to strengthen relations with Contact Countries—including Australia—has opened up the possibility of increased consultation between the Alliance and countries outside the trans-Atlantic area on global security challenges.\(^ {28}\)

For the first time since the conflict in Afghanistan commenced in 2001, an Australian Defence Minister was invited to join NATO counterparts to discuss the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan. Leading up to the February 2008 meeting in Vilnius, Lithuania the then Minister for Defence, Joel Fitzgibbon, was concerned about the strategic level information being provided by NATO to Australia on the Afghanistan mission. At that time, concerns were raised that Australia did not have adequate access or input to NATO’s strategy in Afghanistan—non-NATO member contributing countries received less information than NATO member contributing countries. The Vilnius meeting allowed Australia to contribute at a strategic level to NATO’s action plan on Afghanistan.\(^ {29}\)

At the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, Heads of State/Government endorsed an Action Plan for the development and implementation of NATO’s contribution to a Comprehensive Approach to security—including by collaborating with non-NATO allies, such as Australia.\(^ {30}\) This approach combines military and civilian elements. The NATO website stated:

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Decisions taken at the 2008 Bucharest Summit defined NATO’s objectives for its relationships with partners across the globe. These include support for operations, security cooperation, and enhanced common understanding to advance shared security interests and democratic values. To this end, various avenues were created to enhance political dialogue: meetings of the North Atlantic Council with ministers of the countries concerned, high level talks, and meetings with ambassadors. In addition, annual work programmes (referred to as Individual Tailored Cooperation Packages of Activities) were further developed.31

Under the Rudd Government, Australia’s Foreign Minister, Stephen Smith, met several times with the NATO Secretary-General, and addressed the North Atlantic Council in 2008. Australia’s Prime Minister at the time, Kevin Rudd, participated in the NATO Summit in Bucharest in April 2008.

In February 2009, the then Minister for Defence, Joel Fitzgibbon, attended a NATO meeting of Defence Ministers in Poland where he discussed Australia’s commitment to Afghanistan and affirmed the need for non-NATO partner countries to contribute to planning meetings.32

In September 2009, Dr Brendan Nelson was appointed as Australia’s Ambassador to the European Communities (EC), Belgium, Luxembourg, and representative to NATO. In September 2010, Deputy Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Dr Heather Smith, led an Australian delegation to NATO’s headquarters in Brussels for discussion on global strategic issues.33

Parliamentary engagement between the Parliament of Australia and NATO’s parliamentary structures has also increased in recent times. Members of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly’s Defence and Security Committee visited Australia in September 2008, delivering a lecture at Parliament House. From 14–17 November 2009 an Australian parliamentary delegation attended the 55th NATO Parliamentary Assembly’s annual meeting in Edinburgh.34 A report was subsequently

tabled in February 2010. In August 2010, the head of the NATO Parliamentary Committee, Admiral Giampaolo Di Paola, visited Australia for consultations, and delivered a public lecture.

The role of public diplomacy for NATO and citizen engagement has gained prominence over the past few years, as evidenced by the first Shadow Summit that took place in April 2009 which coincided with the 60th anniversary of the Alliance. The second Shadow Summit took place on 15–16 November 2010 in Lisbon, emphasising in particular the important ways in which civil society groups and parliamentarians can work more effectively towards a more transparent NATO organisation.

**Issues for Australia**

The new Strategic Concept calls for the deepening of cooperation between NATO and its partners, including Australia. This includes collaboration on strategic, political and burden-sharing activities.

According to Benjamin Schreer from the Australian National University, the Lisbon Summit delivered two major outcomes for Australia:

NATO members agreed on a phased transition of security responsibilities to Afghan Security Forces by 2014—a development which will prominently feature in Australian policy planning, and

the Strategic Concept as ‘NATO’s premier conceptual guideline defining its major goals, ends and means’ opens up new possibilities for collaboration between Australia and NATO, both in terms of closer security cooperation and the ability to provide a greater contribution to NATO-led operations.

Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard visited NATO Headquarters in October 2010 and met with the NATO Secretary-General to discuss the Afghan mission. The NATO-led ISAF mission in Afghanistan is Australia’s most comprehensive defence commitment overseas with about 1550 Australian military personnel deployed to Afghanistan under Operation Slipper (which also incorporates elements located in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa). In 2009–10 Australia

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In November 2010 Julia Gillard and Defence Minister Stephen Smith attended the NATO Summit in Lisbon, where they held discussions with NATO members and senior partners (including non-NATO members) towards enhancing collaboration, particularly in crisis management and post-conflict reconstruction.\footnote{For a list of representatives from partner countries, see: http://www.natolisboa2010.gov.pt/site_media/attachments/en/paises_parceiros_en.pdf} An official statement by the Australian Government read, in part:

> In particular, the Summit will be an opportunity for the international community to set out further detail on the objective of Afghan authorities assuming lead responsibility for security in Afghanistan by the end of 2014.

> During the Summit, Australia will highlight our strong commitment to mentoring and training the Afghan National Security Forces in Uruzgan Province to enable them to take on responsibility for security arrangements in the province over the next two to four years.\footnote{Govmonitor, ‘Australia’s Minister For Defence Visits Lisbon For NATO Summit’, 21 November 2010, viewed 1 December 2010, http://www.thegovmonitor.com/civil_society_and_democratic_renewal/governance/australias-minister-for-defence-visits-lisbon-for-nato-summit-43013.html}

The 2010 Strategic Concept, on the whole, offers Australia the prospect of benefiting from closer political dialogue with NATO, especially in the context of NATO-led operations to which Australia contributes, and is possibly an opportunity to contribute to the shaping of the Alliance’s strategy. One question for the Australian Government will be whether it will continue with its pragmatic engagement with the Alliance, or will the Security Concept facilitate any adjustments to Australia’s policy towards NATO?

Issues regularly discussed by NATO members, such as disarmament and arms control measures, as well as discussions over the proposed anti-missile defence shield, are also areas in which Australia has an active interest. The future directions of the Afghanistan strategy are of particular interest to Australia given its political, military, civilian and financial investment in the Afghanistan mission.

An ongoing responsibility for the Australian Government in its engagement with NATO is to maintain transparency in the Government’s decisions (with respect to NATO and its field operations to which it contributes) and accountability to the Parliament and the Australian electorate with regard to where Australia’s interests with NATO stand, but also where they might diverge.

With regard to NATO’s strategy towards the Asia Pacific region, Australia is in a position to bring a regional perspective to NATO’s strategic table. The Australian Government’s relationship with NATO also has the potential to extend beyond official discussions to include a greater variety of participants (such as second track diplomatic actors, think-tanks and civil society). NATO’s Shadow Summits have already included civil society representatives, as well as parliamentarians. This would

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provide both the electorate and Parliament with better information about the Government’s engagement with NATO, and present an opportunity for more informed and wider deliberations on foreign policy.

An updated White Paper on foreign policy could also assist by more clearly outlining to the Parliament and the public the nature of Australia’s future engagement with NATO, and how the Government anticipates extending this relationship beyond the field missions into the realm of strategic thinking and long-term solutions to common challenges.