

‘Meeting your unexpected NATO commitments’

Billi McCarthy-Price*

Despite numerous setbacks - in the form of dubious Russian intentions in the region, increasing incidents of digital disruption, and growing concern about US leadership - NATO has significantly strengthened its commitment, particularly to Central and Eastern Europe, in recent years.

In July last year, NATO Allies approved the new [NATO readiness initiative or ‘four thirties’](#); requiring an additional 30 air squadrons, 30 mechanised ground battalions, and 30 combat vessels, ready to deploy within 30 days. This readiness is at the heart of the Alliance’s current principle of ‘deterrence by rapid reinforcement’.

Unfortunately, old-school mobility capabilities, like being able to rapidly deploy large ground battalions across the continent, are currently significantly compromised as a [result of insufficient](#), and oftentimes failing, European hard infrastructure.

Numerous factors have contributed to this deficit: [lack of sustainable funding sources for maintenance and upgrades](#), poor communication between infrastructure and national security portfolios, as well as inadequate consideration of weight increases during capability acquisition.

By increasing the number and size of military exercises in the region, NATO expects to quickly grow its understanding of the primary challenges it faces in delivering a potent threat response and, in turn, develop a clear path forward to address these.

Potential steps towards this goal should include increasing funding in primary infrastructure necessary for rapid reinforcement, developing better task-sharing processes to ensure that resulting acquisitions are used and maintained sustainably, as well as supporting and empowering national militaries to develop their individual and collective response capacity by acquiring capabilities that might not be ‘sexy’, but that get the job done.

Sadly, the current lack of capacity and historically poor motivation from European militaries to meet [NATO-agreed defence budget requirements](#) reflect a seemingly shared fatalism, that in the end, the US will always be there to save the day.

It is ironic then to witness a distinct absence of any significant consideration of how the US’ current strategic challenges and other alliances, such as [Australia-New Zealand-US Security Treaty \(ANZUS\)](#), may impact European Allies’ ability to meet their NATO commitments, if required to participate in rapid reinforcement activities to “restore and maintain security” in other regions.

There is a seemingly indestructible Eurocentric view that any future invocation of the Treaty will be on ‘home soil’. And indeed, [Article 6 of NATO](#) categorises a number of geographical areas protected by the Treaty, highlighting that the North Atlantic area above the Tropic of Cancer is where the fight is permitted, and expected, to be.

But modern warfare, fought not only in the domain of land and along State borders (as was accepted when the Treaty was signed in 1949), but also within the previously unimagined realms of cyber and



space domains, does not fit neatly within this categorisation. And in an increasingly contested and unfamiliar global order, this rationale can no longer be promoted or maintained.

As power shifts to Asia, not only in response to China's, but also India's, rapid growth and strategic influence, Europe must realise it might not be the first to the fight, and begin seriously considering what second prize in a beauty contest with the US really looks like.

The Asia-Pacific region - an area more than 20 times the size of the European continent - is coming under increasing strategic scrutiny from many nations, to a certain extent Russia, but not the least of which is China. Not only does China's Belt and Road Initiative there bring much needed funding to nations who have bills to pay and bridges to build, it also provides the long sought after opportunity to establish a long-term presence and ongoing influence in countries where there has been no previous alternative to 'the West'.

Never one to let its ongoing promotion of democratic values and [FREEDOM](#) fall by the wayside, the influence of China in the Pacific region is building to be a [volatile source of conflict for the US](#). This has been only further emphasised by its 'Pivot to Asia' and corresponding step-up of activities in the region, including [freedom of navigation exercises](#) in the South China Sea. The ANZUS treaty has been put to the test in this space and found to hold true; but can the same be said for NATO?

The traditional view of NATO as an insurance policy, and not as a cheque that realistically could be cashed in within the next decade, highlights the tunnel vision that many European nations demonstrate in their interpretation of the global order, the risk likelihood they attribute to the impact of conflict in regions outside of their own, and their preparedness for the role they would be required to play within this.

If tensions between the US and China reach a ['boiling point'](#) and Europe is drawn into a different kind of NATO fight than it is prepared for, in a region that it is not properly exercised in, the seeming importance of the weight-capacity of bridges in Poland to support rapid reinforcement will quickly fade into obscurity.

About the author:

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