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NATO Wales and the Future of Western Grand Strategy

This September's NATO summit is set to be one of the most significant since the end of the Cold War. To be considered a success, John Hemmings believes it must align transatlantic concerns with US global concerns, such as restricting the sale of advanced European military systems to Russia and China.

By John Hemmings for ISN

By all accounts, the upcoming NATO Summit in Wales is likely to be one of the most important since the end of the Cold War. Originally cast as a post-Afghanistan 'lessons-learned' and maritime security summit, events in Ukraine and Crimea have dramatically shifted the agenda since February and highlighted the need to redevelop NATO's core mission of collective defense and deterrence. The sudden massing of Russian armor and more than 150,000 Russian [troops](#) on Ukraine's eastern border in February at the height of the crisis, reminded Western leaders – particularly those in Poland and the Baltic states – of their vulnerability to old-fashioned conventional forces. However, it has already become clear that these threat-perceptions of Russia are not held equally by all 28 member states in the Alliance, as [Germany and Italy](#) balance their security concerns with dependence on Moscow's energy imports.

These differences may emerge as a serious problem during the summit, stymying a collective path forward. Worse still, European policy elites continue to worry about shifts in US global strategy, particularly the US Pivot strategy and how the shift of US attention away from the European theatre to the Asian one will affect force posture in-region. These fears are likely to run into US frustration over NATO members' under-spending, a common feature of every NATO summit since the 1990s, and one that will have real – rather than symbolic – meaning this year. Of course, despite all of these challenges, NATO remains the most powerful global defensive alliance, in terms of its combined GDP, military spending, and military technology. As with all collective efforts, its real weaknesses lie in coordination. With the US Pivot to Asia likely to become a permanent feature of its global strategy, the NATO Wales Summit must find a strategic posture for the West that accepts and complements that reality.

What does the Pivot mean to Europe?

The US Pivot to Asia is still poorly understood in Europe. Some believe that the policy is merely rhetorical in nature, while others see it as a misjudged containment attempt towards China, one that –

as Australian academic Hugh White contends -fans the flames of great power rivalry. Primarily, European elites view the Pivot in terms of its effect on European security. As one worried British defense industrialist asked the author at the Farnborough Air Show last week, "How many ships will the US move from Bahrain to Asia?" According to former Secretary of State for East Asia, Kurt Campbell, one of the policy's architects, the policy is a 'three-legged stool', with diplomatic and economic surges to accompany the security surge. The origin of the policy, Campbell insists, lies not just in China's rise - though that certainly factors in - but in Asia's rise. The Asian Development Bank [predicts](#) that Asia will account for 40% of global GDP by 2050. In other words, Americans are turning to Asia because that is where the money is.

Competing Issues at Wales

The significance of this shift in global economics is important for Europeans to understand, because it negates the possibility that the pivot is a short-lived policy, destined to fade with the arrival of a new President in the White House. This simply will not happen. Asia will remain a central - if not *the* central - driver of US global strategy. Confronted with this reality, NATO's European member-states are likely to ask at the upcoming Summit how this shift deals with Russian *revanchism*. In addition to Russia and the core mission of collective defense, there will be a number of other competing sources of concern, each suggesting varying NATO policy responses. These include continuing instability on Europe's periphery - in the Maghreb, in the Levant and in sub-Saharan Africa - which indicates that NATO will need to retain expeditionary and COIN capabilities honed in Afghanistan, despite the war weariness of European publics to take part in operations abroad. The growth of maritime insecurity - piracy on European sealanes of communication - and the growth of anti-access, area denial strategies mean that naval power should be high on the list of US-European priorities. Despite pulls from other sources of insecurity, Asia will remain the unspoken driver of US priorities at Wales, which, according to Luis Simón in a recent RUSI Journal [article](#), "...will have an impact on every one of the themes to be discussed in Wales, including the evolution of the Afghanistan mission after the end of combat operations in 2014, the need to reassure Eastern European allies, capability development and force planning...and the future of the Alliance's partnerships." The key, of course, is ensuring that the US and Europe allocate roles within NATO that complement rather than compete with each other.

One way of creating more cohesion is for Europeans to take a more holistic approach to strategy. Europeans cannot execute a strategic pivot to Asia in quite the way that the US is doing - geography and resources impose their limits. But they can begin to link European security objectives with US global concerns, so that they make Washington's job easier rather than more difficult. Defense experts have long sought a strict NATO arms sales regime, in which military technology exports to 'states of concern' are banned. In the wake of the downing of MH-17, there has been a push to ban defense exports to Russia - with France still playing the outlier on the Mistral sale. However, a more comprehensive regime would take on board US global interests and restrict European defense exports and dual-use products to countries of concern in the Asia Pacific. Though European defense suppliers have been subject to an Arms Embargo to China since 1989, many have found ways around it and have fueled China's military modernization. China's Beidou satellite network, for instance - used for missile targeting - is the [result](#) of a joint venture with the European Space Agency. A number of NATO-member firms like Eurocopter, Agusta Westland, and Pratt & Whitney provide systems that have helped the PLA build up its modern attack helicopter force. The Z-9, Z-10 and Z-19 attack helicopters all utilize European design or components, acquired in joint ventures. If the US is attempting to deal with increasing insecurity East Asia, it should not have to deal with advanced European-built military systems.

The US and its NATO allies can also allocate different roles according to capability. It is all but inevitable that the shift of US resources to the Asia-Pacific will draw on US capabilities in Europe and

the Middle East. Naturally, this will bring about a call for greater European leadership. This might be a discussion of spending levels, and it might also be a discussion of the allocation of resources. This 'leading from behind' approach was used successfully during the Libyan intervention, in which Anglo-French leaders led the diplomatic campaign and directed the overall military objectives, while accessing American surveillance and targeting systems. To some extent, this division of responsibilities is also taking place along geographical lines. France's intervention earlier this year in Mali indicates its preference for sub-Saharan operations. The UK continues to concentrate its energies on the Gulf Arab states, while Germany and Poland maintain their focus on Eastern Europe. However, there is much to be agreed upon, and given the shortcomings of nearly all European states in C4ISTR, in munitions supply, and in heavy lift capacity, US forces will continue to play a significant role in these areas for the foreseeable future. As the US continues to scale back, however, the Europeans can and should step up their own role and this requires greater spending.

The prospect of a US Secretary of Defense [haranguing](#) NATO members to spend more on defense has become commonplace to the point of cliché. NATO members – including Germany – must consider their security requirements from a collective vantage point and allocate more funding to their own defense. According to the [2013 NATO Annual Report](#), US spending accounted for 73% of all NATO spending, up from 68% in 2007. At present, only three European member states pay the required amount: the UK (2.3), France (2.3), and Greece (2.6), while Russia spends 4.5% of its GDP on defense. While there are likely to be windy debates on the utility of the 2% rule, full compliance would fund projects like Smart Defense, building up cyber, reconnaissance and heavy lift capabilities. Additionally, such spending increases would be hugely symbolic of NATO determination, providing reassurance and deterrence in equal measure.

If successful, NATO Wales may become a turning point in how the West deals with growing global insecurity. The Alliance will see yet another iteration of its objectives, this one closer to its original mission and orientation: the protection of Western society, values and freedoms. In order for this mission to be successful, the United States and Europe must link transatlantic strategic concerns with US global concerns, and enable each other to improve security provision. Such a strategic shift is not impossible. One need only look at the foundations of NATO, at the diplomatic haggling, the messiness, and the tug and pull of competing interests that has been there from the beginning to realize that the Alliance has always been like this. And yet, despite this messiness, it has sustained and protected the West for more than 60 years. This suggests that it is likely to continue to do so for another 60.

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