



Partners from a large island: Australia and CSDP

by Pierre Minard

Last week – virtually on the eve of the centenary of the battle of Gallipoli, in which so many Anzac soldiers lost their lives – Australia's Foreign Minister Julia Bishop signed a Framework Participation Agreement (FPA) with HR/VP Federica Mogherini. Australia thus became the 17th country to date to become a partner in EU crisis management. The aim of the FPA is, essentially, to provide the legal basis for third states to contribute to CSDP missions and operations.

Yet Australia is not just another country to be added to an ever-growing list of FPA partners: it is a very specific (although formally not a 'strategic') partner whose interests often coincide or overlap with those of the Union and its member states. And it is part and parcel of the 'global West', so to speak. Despite lying on opposite sides of the globe, Canberra and Brussels are in many respects very close.

This latest milestone in cooperation between Australia and the EU is all the more auspicious given that the Abbott government is preparing a new White Paper on defence due to be released before the end of the year, thereby redefining its overall security priorities in the light of a changed environment.

A long history of cooperation...

This additional step towards security and defence cooperation with Europe reinforces what is already a solid relationship. Besides the strong historical ties that bind Australia to the United Kingdom and the successive waves of migrants from southern Europe

that it welcomed to its shores after the Second World War, both FPA partners have constantly stressed the common values they share, the many interests they have in common, and the similarity of the approaches they take at international level on a number of issues.

Even though Australia's foreign and security policy has been increasingly linked to that of the United States, it is worth underlining here that the EU is its third trading partner, after China and Japan, and its second source of imports behind China. In the defence business field, in particular, several EU member states have sizeable interests with Australia – notably Spain, France and Sweden.

...also in crisis management

When it comes to crisis management operations, Australia has committed its fair share of troops over the years. To start with, the country has been at the forefront of the various peacekeeping operations conducted in Timor-Leste since 1999. In particular, it provided half of the INTERFET contingent, to which many European countries also contributed troops.

More generally, the country has been involved – just like the UK – in the main US-led operations of the past decade, with interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Australia has also been part of the Combined Maritime Forces which are deployed in the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea, again under US leadership. Canberra's involvement in the Horn of Africa dates



back to the early 1990s with the UNITAF operation in Somalia. But the most recent case of cooperation with the EU started in 2014 with Australia's contribution to EUCAP Nestor, which already prefigured the FPA that has just been signed.

Currently, Australia's defence forces are deployed in no less than 14 operations, involving a total of approximately 2,750 personnel. Among these, 600 are engaged in international combat operations against ISIL in Iraq and 400 deployed in Afghanistan with the new NATO mission Resolute Support. Afghanistan has been one of the main theatres of intervention for Canberra, with 26,500 personnel deployed in the country since 2002

Multilateralism Down Under

As a country located quite far geographically from its traditional allies, Australia has had little choice but to adopt a differentiated multilateral approach. This means that it has managed to adapt its posture to both the profile of missions and its own geographical location, which covers the entire Indo-Pacific region.

Australian forces have been deployed on several occasions in response to turmoil and instability in its most direct neighbours. They took the lead in all operations in Timor-Leste (1999-2013) and in the peacekeeping operation in the Solomon Islands (2003-2013). The farther from its shores the intervention, the more multilateral Canberra's approach becomes.

Stability in the region requires good relations with neighbours, whoever they are. With the rise of China as a key regional power, security ties have been upgraded into a strategic dialogue, including annual defence forums as well as joint exercises. Similar – if less developed – exchanges also exist with other Asian countries such as Japan, South Korea or India.

Australia, however, favours multilateral set-ups and frameworks to support its security and defence policy. The Five Power Defence Arrangements – signed with New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Singapore and Malaysia – reflect this approach. By the same token, Australia is involved in the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+), the ASEAN Regional Forum as well as the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium.

Off the Horn

The signing of the FPA with the EU has to be understood in the perspective of engaging with any partner whose relevance in Australia's wider neighbourhood is on the rise. From Canberra's viewpoint, Europe's long-term engagement in the Horn of Africa ticks all the right boxes in terms of security, thereby explaining

its willingness to extend its participation in CSDP operations like EUCAP Nestor.

The Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea are of crucial importance to Australia for the same reasons as they are for the EU: to preserve free and safe access to a vital sea line of communication. As underlined in the food-for-thought document laying the groundwork for the 2015 White Paper, the country relies heavily on the oil imports that transit through that area. On top of that, cooperation with the EU in this arena means joining an already working structure – with extra benefits for both sides.

Where else?

So far, Australia's contribution to CSDP missions has focused primarily on maritime aspects, as a complement to its engagement in counter-piracy efforts in the Indian Ocean. Canberra has an impressive track record in this domain, and it would seem to be the area where Europeans could benefit most from the partnership.

For instance, considering also the country's rising oil imports from the Gulf of Guinea, it is possible to envisage Australian support to future European initiatives in the sectors of maritime security and capacity building.

The country's maritime expertise includes also specifically 'civilian' tasks such as search and rescue – demonstrated on the occasion of the disappearance of the MH370 flight over the Indian Ocean – as well as surveillance and deterrence at sea. Over the past few years, Australia has had to cope with waves of 'boat people', mostly from Indonesian shores. Despite its government's policy towards asylum seekers being controversial, it is undeniable that its naval operations against human traffickers have been quite effective – while the country has a positive record overall in terms of immigration policy proper and integration of migrants.

An additional area of cooperation which was discussed between HR/VP Mogherini and the Australian Foreign Minister was counter-terrorism. This issue has gained traction with last year's hostage crisis in Sydney – which foreshadowed the recent terrorist attacks in Paris and Copenhagen – as well as the perceived threat represented by Australian nationals returning from Syria and Iraq. But here bilateral cooperation is more likely to take place elsewhere – on the airwaves, on the web and possibly also on the ground, rather than at sea.

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