

Study tour to Brussels for leading security experts and representatives of think tanks from “Partners Across the Globe” countries, 19-22 May 2014

I was invited by NATO’s Public Diplomacy Division to take part in this visit, which was more like an extended seminar than a study tour. I was one of 14 representatives from Afghanistan, Australia, Japan, Mongolia, New Zealand, Pakistan, and South Korea.

The only side-visit out of NATO Headquarters was to the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) at Mons, about 90 minutes from Brussels by coach.

NATO has several partnership arrangements, and “Partners Across the Globe” (PAG) is the one that links NATO to the Asia-Pacific region. The study tour was a two-way forum within which we were briefed on current NATO issues and were expected in turn to provide NATO with an Asia-Pacific perspective on global issues that could affect NATO’s interests - like Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) proliferation, maritime security, cyber security, terrorism, piracy etc. I gave a brief presentation on Australia’s strategic perspective.

As NATO’s Afghanistan mission winds down, NATO is conscious that it needs to be thinking about promoting its relevance. There will be an important NATO summit in Wales during 4-5 September 2014, the first to be held in the UK since 1990. (The most recent NATO summit was in Chicago in 2012.) As British Prime Minister David Cameron noted “The summit will also be about the future of our alliance. Britain has always been at the forefront of shaping the alliance, from its start in 1949 to NATO’s current operations, and the 2014 Summit will be critical in ensuring NATO remains a relevant, modern, adaptable force fit for the 21st century.”

Part of the NATO Summit preparation process is meeting with NATO’s partners to ensure that it is across all possible issues. NATO analysts and policymakers were particularly interested in the strategic perspective from our part of the world - which is very different to that of NATO and the northern hemisphere, where the main focus now is on Russia’s actions in Ukraine (a NATO “Partnership for Peace” country).

NATO has been engaged in recent decades in areas peripheral to its core European interests - in the Balkans, Afghanistan and Libya, and now that it has a problem on its doorstep, is not sure what to do about it beyond freezing military contact with Russia. To complicate matters further, NATO responses have to be in line with EU economic interests. None of the southern hemisphere speakers even mentioned Russia as a country of concern; instead their focus was on the rise of China, regional defence modernisation, and potential regional flashpoints.

The main value for me was the opportunity to exchange ideas with senior officials from NATO and meet with an interesting and stimulating group of academics from the Asia-Pacific region.

I should add that Brussels is deservedly famous for its beer, chocolate and bureaucrats. Brussels’ most famous son, whose image is everywhere, is of course Hergé’s Tintin.

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