



Make NATO a Pacific Power? British Government Comes Up With Another Dumb Idea

Doug Bandow

May 9, 2022

British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss seems intent on promoting grand designs beyond her nation's abilities. Last month she proclaimed the need for "a global NATO." She dismissed what she decried as "the false choice between Euro-Atlantic security and Indo-Pacific security. In the modern world we need both." The transatlantic alliance "must have a global outlook, ready to tackle global threats."

Yet until now, at least, NATO really meant North America and the Others, and North America really meant the US. Alas, Washington already has a major security role in the Pacific and is a potential guardian of Taiwan. Most US policymakers appear to support going to the island nation's defense, even though they have yet to ask the American people whether the latter are willing to bear the burden and expense of attempting to forever project sufficient power thousands of miles away to defeat nuclear-armed China in its neighborhood.

What does Truss imagine Europe will bring to the table – or, more importantly, the Indo-Pacific?

European defense fecklessness is long-established. Governments don't spend enough on their militaries and don't spend in the right ways. Even the United Kingdom devotes barely two percent of GDP to the military. The European people also have demonstrated great reluctance to fight for one another, let alone challenge China. And, most practically, few members maintain armed forces of even minimal effectiveness, let alone ones capable of operating in Asia or the Pacific.

At least the UK has a navy, with 20 surface combatants, including two aircraft carriers, and ten submarines. France has 22, one, and eight, respectively. After that, the numbers drop precipitously. Once mighty Germany has 11, 0, and six, and its military's lack of readiness long has been a national embarrassment. Italy's statistics are 17, 0, and eight. Spain has 11, 0, and two, plus a few amphibious and support ships. Everyone else, not so much. After all, Montenegro doesn't have much need for a navy, or even a military!

In Asia even more than Europe NATO is the US and not much more.

One could imagine a massive European military buildup to contain China ... if European governments hadn't just promised to undertake a massive European military buildup to contain

Russia. Moscow's attack on Ukraine sparked at least a temporary commitment by alliance members across the continent to bolster their armed forces to deter a future attack.

However, even if they are serious – a huge "if" – the process will be arduous and lengthy. Assuming governments don't quickly go back to their old ways once the Russo-Ukraine war ends, one way or another. Indeed, despite these new pledges, which follow decades of broken European promises to spend and do more militarily, Washington is increasing its deployments on the continent as the Baltic states and Poland demand American garrisons.

Truss also is committed to Europe, much more than to the Indo-Pacific. She appeared to be channeling Margaret Thatcher when she declared: "The war in Ukraine is our war – it is everyone's war because Ukraine's victory is a strategic imperative for all of us. Heavy weapons, tanks, aeroplanes – digging deep into our inventories, ramping up production. We need to do all of this."

But that is not all. Ukraine must be rearmed and rebuilt. Moreover, "We will keep going further and faster to push Russia out of the whole of Ukraine." Why stop there, however? She added: "this has to be a catalyst for wider change. We must also apply this tough stance to the threats that are emerging beyond Ukraine."

So, naturally, NATO must do more: "The Eastern Flank must be strengthened, and we must support crucial states like Poland. That's why we are increasing our troop presence and we're deepening our defense cooperation." And then, "alongside Ukraine, the Western Balkans and countries like Moldova and Georgia have the resilience and the capabilities to maintain their sovereignty and freedom." Of course, NATO's door also must remain ever open to new members.

NATO's European members – presumably included in Truss's "we" – are going to prepare to patrol the far reaches of the globe too? No problem, apparently. "We need to pre-empt threats in the Indo-Pacific, working with allies like Japan and Australia to ensure that the Pacific is protected. We must ensure that democracies like Taiwan are able to defend themselves."

To do this "We should keep strengthening our NATO alliance with bonds around the world, like the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force, the 5 Eyes, and the AUKUS partnership we have with the US and Australia. And we want to keep growing our ties with countries like Japan, India and Indonesia."

That's all? How about placing a garrison on the Moon to forestall an attack by Mars?

This is the moment to roll a laugh track for a Hollywood sitcom. The Europeans might do a bit more for themselves, but one should never underestimate the continent's commitment to cheap ride on America. Maybe they will even make an effort to bolster members in the east while tossing some cash and weapons at nations like Georgia. But *protect Australia, Japan, and Taiwan?*

It makes one wonder what British officials were serving at the fabled parties that busted COVID rules – a few funny cigarettes along with some psychedelics to spice up their drinks? Whatever it was, does anyone else in Europe share Truss' vision?

It isn't even certain that the Johnson government is onboard. Last year it issued a blueprint for "global Britain" which advocated "increased international activism," including in the Indo-

Pacific. The document explicitly de-emphasized defense of Europe, intending to leave that to other states, such as Germany.

However, that was before Russia invaded Ukraine. The ferocious political attacks on Prime Minister Boris Johnson. And the Conservative Party's big losses in local elections. It is hard to predict the future course of a premier known to believe in nothing other than his political survival. And whatever his preferences, the British people may not be anxious to put Taiwan atop their defense wish list.

If not, Truss is likely to shift her efforts to lobbying the Biden administration to do more. In December she did her best to entangle Washington in Ukraine and resist the sort of compromise that might have defused the conflict. Rather than acknowledge past broken promises and admit that the Western commitment to include Ukraine in NATO was a lie, the allies reinforced the security threat perceived by Russia.

Truss resorted to unusual tactics. Reported *The Times of London*: "The Foreign Office hired a tribute act to the Fab Four called the Cheatles in an effort to woo Antony Blinken, the US secretary of state, and stiffen the resolve of Britain's partners against aggression from Moscow at the G7 summit of foreign ministers of foreign ministers Truss and Blinken discovered a shared love of Lennon and McCartney when they dined together at the Cop26 climate summit in Glasgow last month. Truss would like America to take as tough a line as possible to deter Putin from ordering more than 90,000 troops into Ukraine."

There may be worse reasons to risk war with a nuclear-armed power than getting to listen to a tribute band, but not many.

NATO is just play-acting when it talks about confronting China. The US might welcome Europe's assistance if war erupted with Beijing, but the likelihood of receiving meaningful and timely military is only slightly north of zero. Last year Germany sent a solo warship to the Pacific to impress the PRC with Berlin's commitment – and then asked to make a stop in Shanghai, which the Chinese rejected. France sent *two* ships through contested waters. Only the UK was vaguely serious, sending a carrier strike group and announcing plans to permanently deploy two ships to the region, though they will lack a permanent base. That is enough to irritate Beijing, but not enough to scare it. And Washington shouldn't expect much from anyone else, like the Slovaks or North Macedonians.

It would be more helpful for Washington if Europe defended itself, leaving America to bring its forces home. European governments have more incentive and domestic political support to protect themselves than Asian states. The European NATO members have generally configured their force structures for continental crises. And one is occurring today, causing wailing and gnashing of teeth among countries desperate for an increased US presence, especially in their own countries.

Instead of extending febrile yet superficial efforts to the Asia-Pacific, Europeans should take over their own security. They should stop asking for US support. They should provide any garrisons required by Russia's neighbors. They should relieve Washington of arming and funding Ukraine. Once they have secured themselves, they could consider taking an active role elsewhere including in the Asia-Pacific. But that would be in the future, after they fulfill their most important responsibility, defending themselves.

The next time Truss comes up with a grand new job for America, US officials should avoid being played like Beatles music. If the UK wants to try to reestablish its global role, more power to it. But Washington should focus on avoiding new conflicts. And on bringing American troops home.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.