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# Australia and Japan Security Ties: An accelerating partnership

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In 2007, Shane returned to Canberra and joined a newly-formed Afghanistan section, where he worked closely with the Department of Defence and other agencies to prepare policy on Australia's engagement in Afghanistan. In 2010, he was posted as the Deputy Head of Mission in Harare (Zimbabwe). On his return to Australia in August 2013, Shane was appointed Director of the Consular Information Section. In August 2014, he was posted to Kabul as Deputy Head of Mission.

Shane returned to Australia in August 2015 and commenced duties in the Executive Branch on a project to cut red tape and embed a culture of innovation in DFAT. He is currently attending the Defence and Strategic Studies Course at the Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies at the Australian Defence College.

## **Abstract**

This paper examines the accelerating security ties between Australia and Japan, particularly over the past decade. It contends that for Australia, the impetus to strengthen security ties with Japan is largely driven by concern to shape an acceptable rules-based order. It argues that changes to Japan's security posture have been driven by the rise of China, and that the changing balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region, brought about by China's rise, is assessed by both Japan and Australia as a strategic challenge.

The paper addresses the concerns that closer security relations with Japan are incompatible with a productive relationship between Australia and China, arguing that such concerns are exaggerated or indeed unfounded. It concludes that with convergent interests and an impressive record of working together, it is in Australia's strong interest to continue to strengthen its security relationship with Japan over the coming decade.

# Australia and Japan Security Ties: An accelerating partnership

## Introduction

This paper will contend that accelerating security ties between Australia and Japan, since the signing of the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation in 2007, have occurred in the context of broader changes within Japan to 'normalise' its security settings. It will also argue that changes to Japan's security posture have been driven by the rise of China, and that the changing balance of power brought about by China's rise is assessed by both Japan and Australia as a strategic challenge.

It further contends that Australian and Japanese interests converge around the importance of advancing a rules-based order. The paper provides a critique of the proposition that strengthening security ties between Australia and Japan are incompatible with a productive relationship with China. It concludes that it is in Australia's strong interest to continue to strengthen its security relationship with Japan over the coming decade.

## A new era in security ties

When Japan's Prime Minister Abe delivered a speech to both houses of Australia's Parliament in July 2014, it marked a significant moment in the Australia-Japan relationship. In his speech, Abe charted the journey of the relationship from wartime enemies to burgeoning trade partners, and finally to the development of a broad and mature partnership, now described as a 'special strategic partnership'.<sup>1</sup>

Abe also used the opportunity to outline his commitment to Japan adopting a new approach to its security, identifying strengthened cooperation with Australia as a means of implementing this vision, asserting that:

So far as national security goes, Japan has been self-absorbed for a long time. Now, Japan has built a determination. As a nation that longs for permanent peace in the world, and as a country whose economy is among the biggest, Japan is now determined to do more to enhance peace in the region, and peace in the world.... [I]t is to put that determination into concrete action that Japan has chosen to strengthen its ties with Australia.<sup>2</sup>

It was fitting that Abe—a long-time supporter of strengthened security ties between Australia and Japan—was the one to announce the enhanced partnership. Seven years earlier, during his first term as Prime Minister, Abe co-signed the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation with then Prime Minister John Howard.<sup>3</sup> That declaration represented a significant step in security cooperation between the two countries and was the first time since World War 2 that Japan had concluded a diplomatic arrangement on permanent security cooperation with any nation other than the US.<sup>4</sup>

Prior to its signing, ADF and Japan Self Defense Force (JSDF) personnel had already cooperated in Cambodia, East Timor and Iraq.<sup>5</sup> The real significance of the declaration, therefore, lay in the framework it provided for future security cooperation, including in law enforcement, border security, counter-terrorism, disarmament and counter-proliferation, maritime and aviation security, peace operations and humanitarian relief operations.<sup>6</sup>

An important feature of the declaration is that it provides clear commitment to regular exchanges on security issues at ministerial level. This has given rise to regular joint Foreign and Defence Ministers' talks (the so-called 2+2) and a steady elevation in the level of the so-called Trilateral Strategic Dialogue, which includes the US. The setting of aspirations at the senior political level has been a key reason for the success of the declaration in driving engagement forward.

Regular ministerial meetings have given rise to a series of treaty-level agreements, including on cooperation in defence science and technology, information sharing and logistics support.<sup>7</sup> More recently, Australia and Japan have agreed on a 'Pacific Strategy' to advance cooperation on approaches to development, diplomacy and defence in order to support economic prosperity and stability for Pacific island countries.<sup>8</sup>

## Broader changes to Japan's security policies

The series of advances in Australia's security engagement with Japan over the past decade have taken place in the context of a broad re-examination within Japan of the legal basis for its security settings, specifically Article 9 of the Constitution which renounces war.<sup>9</sup> The Constitution was developed in the immediate post-World War 2 period and places unique constraints on Japan's security policies and, in particular, on its ability to participate in collective self-defence. Over time, with encouragement from a number of partners, including Australia, Japan has progressively sought to relax these constraints and thereby 'normalise' its security posture.<sup>10</sup>

This process hastened under Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi who, during his prime ministership from 2001 to 2006, deployed the JSDF in support of coalition missions to Iraq and the Indian Ocean. This was despite the conventional interpretation of Japan's Constitution holding that the JSDF could not engage in these kinds of collective self-defence activities. Since taking office, Abe has added additional impetus to efforts to normalise Japan's security settings.

Within months of becoming Prime Minister in 2006, Abe described the need for Japan to make fundamental changes to the legal basis of its security policy, saying this needed to be reconstructed in order for Japan 'to make greater contributions to the peace and stability of the world'.<sup>11</sup> Abe was not able to achieve this objective during his abbreviated first term as Prime Minister (2006-07) but continued to pursue it after returning to power in 2012. However, facing strong opposition from coalition partners and among the general public, Abe chose to pursue a change in the interpretation of the existing Constitution rather than seeking a formal change.<sup>12</sup>

In September 2015, he successfully achieved this through the adoption by Japan's Parliament of a reinterpretation of Article 9, which now permits Japan to exercise collective self-defence in some circumstances.<sup>13</sup> The SDF is now authorised to use force to defend a country with which it has a close relationship in the event it comes under attack and that attack threatens Japan. With such a change, the JSDF will also be more readily able to provide logistical support to forces engaged in overseas missions protecting Japan's security.

In addition to Abe's steadfast efforts as Prime Minister to increase the scope for Japan to engage in collective self-defence, he has also introduced a number of complementary changes, including the establishment of a National Security Council, and the adoption of a *National Security Strategy* (both in December 2013).<sup>14</sup> These have had the effect of elevating consideration of security issues to the highest levels within the government. This was also his intention in elevating the status of the National Defense Agency to a full ministry during his first term as Prime Minister.<sup>15</sup> Importantly, Abe has further demonstrated his commitment for Japan to play a larger role in international security issues by increasing the budget allocation for defence.<sup>16</sup>

In sum, the changes amount to a significant transformation of Japan's security policies in the past decade. Japan is now more able to conduct operations outside of its territory with partners including Australia.<sup>17</sup> Although transformational, the changes have built on the foundation provided by the existing Constitution and, in that sense, the Japanese Government has rapidly evolved its security approach rather than revolutionising it.<sup>18</sup>

Importantly, Abe's efforts to change Japan's security posture have generated considerable controversy and strong opposition in Japan, as well as within the region. Moreover, despite his overall success in achieving the changes, the challenges he experienced have served to highlight the real constraints to Japan playing a larger role in international security. The public continues to attach significant importance to Article 9 and this attachment means changes to security settings can only be brought about gradually—and are hard fought. In the light of these

constraints, it would not be accurate to describe the changes brought about by Abe as representing a return by Japan to militarism.

## Drivers for changes

Under Prime Minister Abe, the Japanese Government has clearly identified that changes in Japan's security environment are demanding a different approach. In its first *National Security Strategy*, released in December 2013, Japan's security environment is described as 'ever more severe'.<sup>19</sup> In its assessment of the global security environment and challenges, the *National Security Strategy* lists a 'shift in the balance of power' and highlights emerging countries, including China and India, as driving this change.<sup>20</sup> The strategy also refers to the 'changing' relative influence of the US, which can be read as an implicit reference to its declining relative influence.<sup>21</sup>

The strategy is frank in its assessment of China, highlighting its rapidly-increasing military capabilities and insufficient transparency in its military expenditure. It also raises concerns about Chinese actions that are 'incompatible with the existing order of international law', referencing the East China Sea and South China Sea, as well as incursions into Japanese waters.<sup>22</sup> The *National Security Strategy* also refers to China's unilateral announcement of an air defence identification zone in the East China Sea in November 2013. More broadly, China's recent assertive behaviour with respect to territorial issues has added to a growing sense of vulnerability about Japan's place in the world, which was brought into sharp relief when the size of its economy was eclipsed by China in 2010.<sup>23</sup>

The drivers identified by Japan in its *National Security Strategy* are strikingly similar to two of those identified in Australia's *2016 Defence White Paper*.<sup>24</sup> The latter describes 'the roles of the US and China and the relationship between them', and 'challenges to the stability of the rules-based global order' as major drivers of Australia's security environment for the next two decades.<sup>25</sup> Like Japan's *National Security Strategy*, Australia's *Defence White Paper* also specifically highlights 'China's 2013 unilateral declaration of an air defence identification zone in the East China Sea' and asserts that this action has resulted in increased tensions.<sup>26</sup>

As reflected in these key strategic documents, both Australia and Japan make similar assessments of a shift in the balance of power in the region, and outline an approach that includes strengthening security ties with the other. Informed by very similar assessments of the regional security environment, both Australia and Japan also strongly emphasise the importance of strengthening the rules-based global order.

## The case for strengthened cooperation

Australia and Japan have much in common. Both have bilateral alliance relationships with the US, both are liberal democratic nations in the Asia-Pacific region, and the two countries are major trade and investment partners. Both countries also share an appreciation that the presence of US forces in the region has supported stability and provided a foundation for dynamic economic growth, with both attaching strong importance to ensuring this continues.<sup>27</sup>

For Australia, Japan's suitability as a partner is underpinned by this convergence of interests, which has provided the basis to strengthen the security relationship over the past decade. Both countries view these efforts as complementary to their respective alliance relationships with the US, which the US has encouraged.<sup>28</sup> Further, Australia and Japan have worked together to shape the regional architecture in the Asia-Pacific region, including during the creation of APEC and the East Asian Summit.<sup>29</sup>

In doing so, Australia and Japan have helped create multilateral avenues for international engagement that also serve to support a rules-based approach. The re-emergence of China as an international power means that this kind of coalition building in support of a rules-based approach is of increasing importance to Australia and Japan. Both countries seek to enmesh China within a regional order that is acceptable, rather than have China's rise dictate the nature



of that order. This will remain a challenge for policy-makers in Australia and Japan for the foreseeable future.

The global nature of contemporary security issues means that the formation of effective international partnerships is essential. Both Australia and Japan lack sufficient weight to unilaterally advance security interests and this will increasingly be the case as relative power dynamics continue to change. Australia recognises that as the world's third largest economy, with a highly-capable government, and possessed of considerable hard and soft power, Japan can add considerable weight to efforts to shape the region.

In addition, Australia and Japan have established a track record of effective cooperation, including in humanitarian and disaster relief operations, which has benefited stability in the region. Despite the rapid increase in the relative power of others, Australia and Japan remain highly-capable countries within Asia. As such, close cooperation and enhanced security engagement together can increase mutual effectiveness in responding to common challenges—and is highly desirable.

There have also been economic benefits for Australia arising from its closer security relationship with Japan. During the same July 2014 visit to Australia in which Abe announced strengthened security ties with Australia, he signed with then Prime Minister Tony Abbott the 'Japan-Australia Economic Partnership Agreement'.<sup>30</sup> Abe's signature closed a neat circle because in his first term as Prime Minister he had agreed to the commencement of negotiations in 2007.

Negotiations took the better part of a decade and Abe's determination to forge stronger ties with Australia played a decisive role in the conclusion of the agreement. In progressing it, Abe had to overcome considerable opposition from interest groups—particularly the strong agricultural lobby—but had pressed on regardless. That the agreement was reached in the face of opposition provides a measure of the priority the Japanese Government accords to cultivating a stronger partnership with Australia.

Indeed, the joint statement between the two Prime Ministers on the entry into force of the agreement makes a clear link with security issues, with the media release noting that 'the Japan-Australia Economic Partnership Agreement lays the foundations for the next phase of bilateral economic relations, and will strengthen "the special strategic partnership" between Japan and Australia'.<sup>31</sup>

## The risks of enhanced security ties

Critics of efforts to strengthen Australia's security relationship with Japan have tended to express concern that these efforts may draw Australia into rivalry between Tokyo and Beijing, with potential for miscalculations and possible conflict. In so doing, some critics have tended to overstate the nature of the cooperation between Australia and Japan, including by describing it as a 'de-facto strategic alliance'.<sup>32</sup>

This description creates a misleading impression that the nature of Australia's relationship with Japan could compel Australian decision-makers to commit Australian forces to an escalating incident in the East China Sea. This is not accurate. Australian policy-makers continue to have clear discretion to decide how to respond to any such incident. The possibility that enhanced Australian security ties with Japan may also be used to urge restraint and de-escalation during times of heightened tension has been largely overlooked in this debate.

Some commentators suggest that Australia's relations with key states in the Asia-Pacific region have become a 'zero-sum game'.<sup>33</sup> Implicit is the proposition that advances in the security relationship with the US—and by extension Japan—come at the expense of Australia's relationship with China. This is not supported by the evidence. During the same period in which Australia has strengthened its security engagement with Japan, it has also undertaken regular engagement on defence and security issues with China, including by establishing a strategic dialogue. In 2015, Australia and China also participated in practical cooperative activities and

personnel training, including the first-ever trilateral exercise involving Australia, China and the US, and through port visit and naval exercises.<sup>34</sup>

Australia's efforts to strengthen security ties with Japan have also had no discernible impact on the broader Australia-China bilateral relationship. The entering into force of a bilateral Free Trade Agreement between Australia and China in December 2015 provides a compelling demonstration that the two countries continue to maintain a productive relationship despite the advances in the Australia-Japan security relationship over the same period.<sup>35</sup> If China is unduly concerned by Australia's approach to Japan, it has not become tangible.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that while Australian and Japanese security interests are similar, they are not identical. Japan's concern about China's rise is coloured by historical rivalry and intensified by its geographic proximity and disputed territories, and this is driving broader changes to its security posture. For Australia, strengthened security relations with Japan provide an opportunity to advance a rules-based regional order. It is, therefore, important for Australian decision-makers to preserve flexibility in responding to security incidents involving Chinese and Japanese forces. The nature of Australia's strategic partnership with Japan provides for this and mitigates the risks.

## Conclusion

The elements that have given rise to strengthened bilateral cooperation on security matters between Australia and Japan since the signing of the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation in 2007 are likely to gain further strength during the coming decade. For Japan, this relates to its concern over the rise of China, and the imperative for it to develop a broader range of partners beyond its alliance relationship with the US. For Australia, the impetus to strengthen security ties with Japan is largely driven by concern to shape an acceptable rules-based order.

As a like-minded partner with economic power and significant weight, Australia's strengthened cooperation with Japan can help advance these efforts. Concerns that closer security relations with Japan would automatically damage Australia's relationship with China are not valid. While Australian policy-makers need to retain discretion to determine an appropriate response in the event of a security incident involving Japanese and Chinese forces, the current strategic partnership provides for this.

With convergent interests, an impressive record of working together, including on security and humanitarian operations, and in light of Japan's sophisticated capacities and economic heft, this paper would argue that it is strongly in Australia's interests to continue to pursue strengthened security cooperation with Japan over the coming decade.



## Notes

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