

SPECIAL RELATIONS, STRATEGIC LOCATIONS PROSPECTS FOR THE JAPAN-AUSTRALIA SECURITY RELATIONSHIP

It is time to deepen and broaden security ties between Japan and Australia, argues **Erik M. Jacobs**

Over the past six decades, Japan and Australia have built one of the closest bilateral partnerships in the Asia Pacific. Their deep economic relationship began not long after World War II and continues to this day, but now security concerns also play a major role in Japan-Australia relations. Despite the recent setback of Australia opting to purchase French instead of Japanese submarines, the prospects for forging a deeper and more robust security relationship remain strong. Both countries have formal alliances with the United States and share commitments to maritime security, freedom of navigation and trade, democratic values, and US-led multilateral efforts in the region.

The need to strengthen and expand the Japan-Australia security relationship has arguably never been as important. As China continues its rapid military modernisation and poses challenges to freedom of navigation in the East China Sea with its 2013 establishment of an ADIZ (Air Defence Identification Zone), and as it builds and militarises disputed islands in the South China Sea, doubts have emerged over whether the Trump administration will remain committed to maintaining the US-led postwar security alliance architecture across the Asia Pacific. The ‘Nixon shocks’ of the early 1970s damaged US-Japan relations when President Nixon visited China without consulting with Japan,¹ but such a ‘Trump shock’ seems unlikely. After successful meetings with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the President confirmed that Article 5 of the

US-Japan Security Treaty applies to the disputed Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea.² He has also stated that he and Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull ‘have a fantastic relationship’ despite an allegedly rough phone call in January.³

At the same time, recent North Korean ballistic missile tests have increased anxiety over Pyongyang’s nuclear ambitions. In response, both Japanese and English-language press⁴ in Japan have called for Japan and Australia to cooperate as ‘quasi-allies’ as the US and its partners look for a solution to North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs.

Although Tokyo’s defence policymaking in the past has been limited by constitutional restraints on the use of force and restrictions on exercising collective self-defence, Japan has played an active role in forging a close relationship with Australia. This article traces the evolution of these ties and suggests some ways the Japan-Australia security relationship should move forward in the short- and longer-term. It also addresses some limits to the relationship and possible areas of divergence. It nonetheless



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argues, however, that in possessing both strategic geography⁵ as the top point and culet of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s self-described ‘security diamond’⁶ in the Asia Pacific—and as signatories to formal security treaty alliances with the United States—Japan and Australia have the unique ability to extend current maritime norms and expand their strategic scope in the region by fostering deeper bilateral ties and working in multilateral fashion with the US.

The China gap

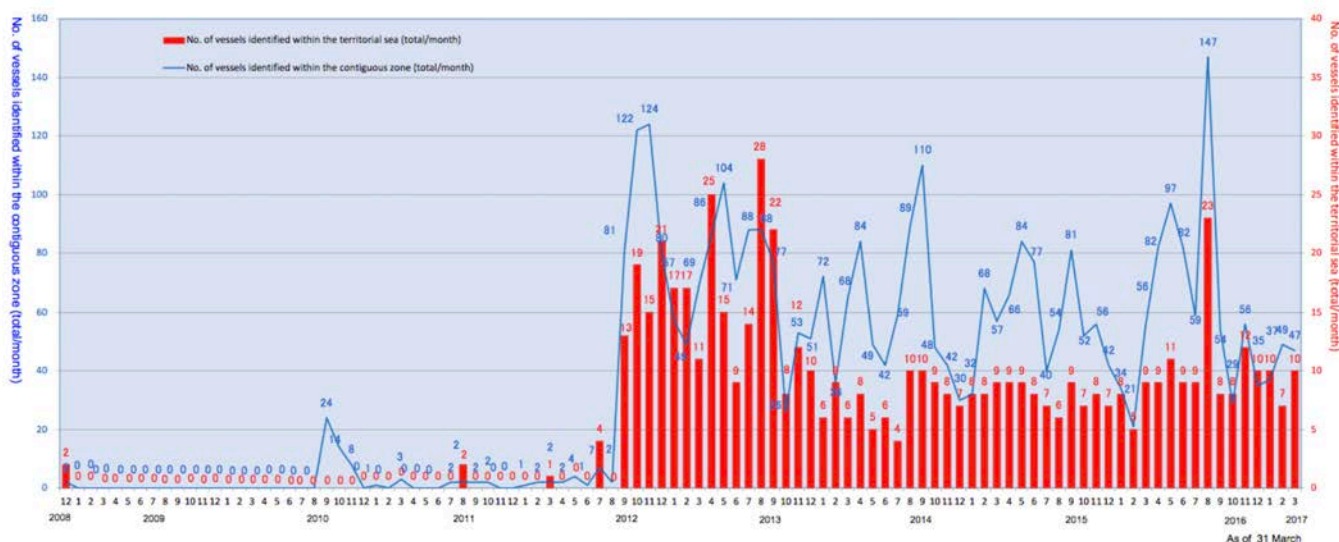
Before discussing the prospects for the Japan-Australia security relationship, it is important to consider some possible points of divergence when it comes to policymaking and the perceived threat that China poses to economic and political interests in Tokyo and Canberra.

Due to Japan’s geographical proximity to China, the two nations share a long and sometimes contentious history. Tokyo and Beijing often squabble over this history, but the ongoing territorial disputes in the East China Sea regarding the Senkaku Islands are a running sore in modern Japan-China relations. Japan’s nationalisation of the islands in 2012⁷ triggered anti-Japanese riots and Japanese product boycotts across China.⁸ The large number of monthly Chinese vessel incursions into Japanese territorial waters around the Islands since

then⁹ strongly indicates China’s increasing activity in the East China Sea and the region at large. Below is a graph compiled by the Japanese Coast Guard that documents Chinese vessel incursions into Japan’s territorial sea (solid bars) and into Japan’s contiguous zone (grey line) between December 2008 and March 2017.

China’s increased maritime presence and posturing around the Senkaku Islands have an impact on Japan’s perception of China as a threat. Japanese people’s distrust of their Chinese neighbours is at all-time high levels. In a 2016 Genron poll, 64% of Japanese respondents cited Chinese intrusions into territorial waters around the Islands as the top reason for their negative impressions of China.¹⁰ A 2016 Pew Global poll showed even stronger concerns, with 86% of Japanese respondents viewing the Chinese negatively.¹¹ These results came on the heels of a 2015 Pew Research Poll showing that 83% of Japanese citizens were ‘very/somewhat concerned’ by territorial disputes between China and neighbouring countries.¹² Understanding Japanese perceptions of the threat China poses to its territorial integrity helps explain why Tokyo could be enthusiastic about deepening security ties with a regional partner like Australia. The same 2015 Pew Poll showed that 63% of Australian respondents were also concerned about China’s territorial disputes with its neighbours.

Figure 1: Chinese Vessel Incursions into Japan’s Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone December 2008-March 2017



Australian and Japanese public opinion on China diverges outside of these territorial concerns. The above-mentioned 2015 Pew Poll showed that 47% of Australians are confident that Chinese President Xi Jinping will 'do the right thing in world affairs' while only 12% of Japanese respondents held this view. The 2016 Pew Poll found that 79% of Australians have a favourable opinion of Japan while most Australian respondents (52%) also viewed China positively.

The divergence between Japanese and Australian views on China is likely due in large part to the scale of economic relations between Australia and China. While both Japan and China have free trade deals with Australia, Japan accounted for only 16% of Australia's export market while China accounted for 34%.¹³ The relative economic importance of China for Australia is arguably reflected in a 2016 Lowy Institute Poll where 43% of respondents stated that both the United States and China are Australia's most important relationships. China even surpassed Japan by 30% to 25% when Australians were asked about which country was Australia's 'best friend in Asia'.¹⁴ These sentiments and economic concerns have led some to question the future of the Japan-Australia relationship.

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Strategic analyst Hugh White leads the discourse questioning deepening ties between Japan and Australia because of the important role that China plays in the Australian economy. He raises concerns that Japan poses 'tricky problems' for Australian policymaking¹⁵ because of the pervasive perception gap on China. White's view is that Australia does not want to have to choose between having economic relations with Japan and China, and he argues that Tokyo is trying to lead Canberra into making a choice that could be detrimental to Australia's long-term politico-strategic interests.¹⁶

By contrast, proponents of deeper ties between Japan and Australia, such as Andrew Shearer at

the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, say that Australia realises it has a stronger hand in dealing with China if it has a strong alliance with the United States and stronger strategic relations with other like-minded countries like Japan.¹⁷ Others, such as Vanessa Wood at the Australian Defence College, refute White's claims by focusing on the importance of shared values between Japan, Australia and the United States. She emphasises that any Chinese backlash in response to further enhanced security cooperation between Canberra and Tokyo would be 'minimal and manageable for the next decade'.¹⁸ In any case, perceptions of Australia's vulnerability to Chinese economic pressure are exaggerated, according to Rory Medcalf from the National Security College,¹⁹ while strategic analyst Ross Babbage makes the point that China faces its own vulnerabilities as growth slows and production costs rise.²⁰

The evolution of the Japan-Australia security relationship

Japan and Australia emerged as strong bilateral partners soon after World War II when Tokyo and Canberra normalised relations in 1952 and ratified the 1957 Commerce Treaty. Economics continued to drive the relationship for several decades, even though tensions in Australia over Japan's economic influence rose during its economic peak in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Australia's passage of the 2014 Economic Partnership Agreement with Japan, estimated to be worth a total of \$70 billion,²¹ further reinforced the deep economic ties between Tokyo and Canberra.

Yet although both nations shared the United States as a common ally, the Japan-Australia relationship continued to lack a high-level security element.²² Without a cohesive national security strategy and hindered by constitutional restraints on the use of the Japan Self-Defence Force (JSDF), opportunities for Japan to deepen security ties with Australia were limited until the end of the Cold War. A new focus on non-traditional security saw the JSDF join the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia's peacekeeping operations in 1992, where the JSDF and Australian Defence Force (ADF) worked together for the first time. They subsequently cooperated under a multilateral

framework in other peacekeeping and humanitarian and disaster relief operations around the world.²³

As the JSDF and ADF worked together in the field, the nature of the security relationship took big steps towards becoming more institutionalised. In 2002, Japan and Australia joined the United States at the bureaucratic level for the first ever US-Japan-Australia Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD). The TSD was upgraded to the ministerial level in 2006 and led to the breakthrough 2007 Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation, which formalised bilateral security relations and established regular ministerial dialogues. The Declaration affirmed that the strategic partnership was based on shared democratic values, freedom and the rule of law as well as shared security interests. It also committed Japan and Australia to working together and with others to respond to new security challenges²⁴ by laying out future ways in which the JSDF and ADF could exchange personnel, conduct joint exercises, and engage in regional capacity-building.

This framework was put to the test only a few months later when the US Navy, JMSDF, Australian Navy and Indian Navy conducted drills in the Indian Ocean as a part of the Malabar Exercises. Led by Japan, the four partners also held informal security talks which became known as the Quadrilateral Initiative (QI). Beijing responded to these talks with a diplomatic demarche, and Prime Minister Rudd withdrew from QI and Malabar in 2008.²⁵ This move ended the QI and angered Japanese participants,²⁶ but it proved to be only a momentary setback for the Japan-Australia security relationship.

The current relationship: towards greater interoperability

The next big leap in the Japan-Australia security relationship came when the Abe administration aggressively changed Japan's national security apparatus in 2013, creating a National Security Strategy (NSS) for the first time. The NSS officially names Australia as an important regional partner that shares universal values and strategic interests with Japan and calls for strengthening the relationship by steadily sharing strategic recognition with Canberra.²⁷ It also aims to promote a wide

range of cooperation with Australia, in coordination with the United States, to maintain and reinforce regional and international peace and stability.

Abe pressed additional normative changes, such as the reinterpretation of Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, to allow Japan to exercise the right of collective self-defence with its allies. This fundamentally changed Japan's strategic posture and allowed the JSDF to operate in a limited role alongside other military forces. Japan's subsequent 2014 Defence White Paper increased tactical-level cooperation in the realm of planning and synchronisation, but still lacked the operational level of cooperation that is critical for ADF leaders to implement strategic gains towards ADF and JSDF interoperability.²⁸

After the elimination of a self-imposed ban on arms exports, Japan aimed to enhance interoperability with its proposed \$40 billion sale of *Soryu*-class submarines to the Australian navy. A sale of this magnitude between US alliance partners would not only have increased Japanese and Australian undersea capabilities, but also would have signalled the new strengths of the Japan-Australia security relationship. In a blow that rattled the core of this relationship, however, Malcolm Turnbull rejected the Abbott-backed deal to purchase the *Soryu*-class submarines and instead chose French submarines to fulfil one of Australia's largest defence contracts in history.

The failed submarine deal is not the only gap between Japan and Australia despite their strong security relationship.

The failed submarine deal is not the only gap between Japan and Australia despite their strong security relationship. Australia's 2016 Defence White Paper scantily references Japan by name even though Japan's 2015 National Defence Program Guidelines committed Japan to deeper ties with Australia. While calling for greater coordination with Japan in intelligence, missile defence and capacity-building, the White Paper denotes that Japan has a different status with Australia than its formal treaty allies the United States and New Zealand.²⁹ This causes some concern in Japan, as

Tokyo consistently views Canberra as its second most important security partner after the US.

In spite of these differences, Japan and Australia remain close partners. In January, a revised version of the 2010 Australia-Japan Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement was signed to further enhance interoperability by improving the capacity of the ADF and JSDF to provide each other with logistical support during joint exercises and operations. Abe has also announced he is working on an agreement to allow better practical cooperation between the JSDF and ADF by the end of the calendar year.³⁰ Greater Japan-Australia engagement in existing joint exercises that also involve the US will deepen operational capacity between the JSDF and ADF to ensure proper preparedness for future contingencies.³¹

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The next steps

Rejoin the Malabar Exercises

By not participating in the Malabar Exercises since 2007, Australia has missed many opportunities to conduct joint operations and participate in capacity-building measures at the operational level with US partners in the region. According to the Defence department, Australia has asked to rejoin the exercises since 2015 but India has yet to make a decision, possibly due to concerns of Chinese reprisal.³² While it may be too late to join July 2017's exercises, the US and Japan should urge India to allow Australia to rejoin future exercises, even if it is first as an observer nation. Such a move could pave the way for the re-establishment of the QI and lead to more robust multilateral security coordination between US partners in the Indo-Asia-Pacific.

North Korea

Pyeongyang's recent machinations aimed at the United States and its allies in Northeast Asia represent the latest in a long line of North Korean threats to the region. Today's challenges are different

as North Korea continues to develop advanced nuclear and long-range ballistic missile capabilities that, it claims, could strike Los Angeles. North Korea has also named Australia as a nuclear target, saying it is 'blindly and zealously toeing the US line'³³ by hosting US Marines in Darwin in order to 'optimise US nuclear war readiness.'³⁴ Australia's strategic depth will be reduced if North Korea completes its nuclear weapons programs—if the continental US is in North Korea's range, so is Australia. Canberra should consider upgrading the Australian navy for sea-based missile defence or ultimately acquiring continental systems, as defence specialist Andrew Shearer has proposed.³⁵

Australia must also develop a strategy to closely work with the United States, Japan and other regional allies regarding the North Korean nuclear crisis. President Donald Trump's willingness to send the Vinson Carrier Strike Group (after a deployment elsewhere) to the Sea of Japan, and South Korea and Japan's willingness to conduct separate bilateral exercises with the US,³⁶ show resolve in the face of Pyongyang's provocations, but Australia has been absent on this front. The US should invite the Australian navy to join a US-led multilateral exercise in Northeast Asia with the purpose of deterring further North Korean threats. This would show the world that Australia is willing to do more alongside the US and its partners in the region.

South China Sea

During the US Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing in April, US Pacific Command Commander Admiral Harris said that the US could conduct Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) through the South China Sea sometime soon.³⁷ Even though Beijing may play an important role in resolving the current North Korean nuclear crisis, it must know that the US and its allies firmly support freedom of navigation in the South China Sea.

Japan's official Diplomatic Bluebook says China's territorial claims in the South China Sea are of serious concern to Japan,³⁸ and at their 2+2 Foreign and Defence Minister's Meeting in April, Canberra and Tokyo expressed their opposition to the use of disputed features in the South China Sea for military purposes.³⁹ According to the Lowy Institute's 2016

poll,⁴⁰ 74% of Australians are in favour of Australia participating in FONOPs in the South China Sea. The government should use this public support to act following its joint statement with Japan. Engaging in a trilateral FONOP with the US and Japan in the South China Sea would show Beijing that Tokyo and Canberra stand steadfast with the US in their commitment to freedom of navigation and a rules-based maritime order amidst Chinese expansionism.

Longer-term engagement

Maritime co-operation with Indonesia

Japan's new ability to export arms has paid dividends in the Philippines⁴¹ and Vietnam⁴² as they recently signed deals to receive Japanese coast guard vessels and TC-90⁴³ surveillance aircraft and patrol ships, respectively. These transfers align with Japan's commitment to protect the rules-based regional order and freedom of navigation in Southeast Asia as non-state threats, territorial disputes, and Chinese militarisation emerge in the region.

Extending Japanese exports to the Indonesian Coast Guard would be a logical next step for Tokyo as Japan has offered to assist Indonesia and other nations to battle terrorism, thwart illegal fishing, and fight piracy and sea kidnapping in Southeast Asia. As a regional power and a Japanese partner, Australia should support such a policy. Despite the fallout from the suspension of defence ties between Indonesia and Australia in January,⁴⁴ it makes sense for Canberra to expand its long-term security relationship with Jakarta in the interests of regional stability. Japan and Australia could work together to equip and train the Indonesian Coast Guard with advanced capabilities so that it can more effectively patrol its waters and maintain its territorial integrity.

Actions like this would deepen ties between Japan and Australia while laying the framework for multilateral cooperation with Indonesia as it addresses concerns with Chinese fishing vessels and disputes in the South China Sea.

Forging a Japan-Australia Treaty Alliance?

Former Prime Minister Tony Abbott called Japan 'Australia's best friend in Asia' and a 'strong ally.'⁴⁵

Even though former Foreign Ministers Bob Carr and Gareth Evans⁴⁶ have urged Australia to remain neutral with Japan for fear of entrapment, leaders in Tokyo and Canberra should consider entering a formal alliance as a long-term strategic goal. Given the current security environment in Northeast Asia, however, Australia would be hesitant to enter into such an agreement because of mutual defence obligations.

One way in which Canberra and Tokyo could move forward to solidify, deepen and clarify their defence ties would be to establish formal guidelines for defence cooperation. Such guidelines would specify situations where the JSDF and ADF would act in the event of a contingency and would enable unprecedented expansion in the scope and breadth of operational collaboration. They would also assuage Australian concerns of being drawn into a conflict in Northeast Asia while taking into account the unique and complex nature of the laws that govern the JSDF.

Japan recently updated its Guidelines for Defence Cooperation with the US and expanded the roles of the JSDF in the agreement. Deepening ties between Australia and Japan, whether through defence guidelines or a formal treaty, would institutionalise years of cooperation and capacity-building while also affirming the enduring nature of the trilateral relationship between the United States, Japan and Australia.

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Conclusion

Japan and Australia must continue to move forward in a manner that is congruent with their shared values. Japan still faces constraints on the role it can play in the international security arena—both with and without Australia and the United States—but Shinzo Abe has stated it is his goal to revise the Japanese constitution by 2020.⁴⁷ Both nations are increasing defence spending to respond to growing challenges. Abe has said that there is 'no

such thinking to keep the defence budget below one percent in the Abe Administration' and this fiscal year's defence budget stands at an all-time high of \$45 billion,⁴⁸ while Australia is in the midst of its largest naval construction program since WWII.⁴⁹ Australia has embraced an active Japanese role in the region and spending more on defence is one way that Japan can gradually increase this role. Whether Australia and Japan forge closer bilateral ties, deepen their relationship with the United States, or develop new multilateral relationships with other states, both countries must now act with an eye to the future to ensure that today's choices enable the necessity of expanding the purview of the Japan-Australia security relationship across the Asia Pacific.

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