

A CHANCE TO GET CLOSER TO JAPAN

Abe's recent election win is a golden opportunity for Australia to deepen strategic ties with Japan, argues **Erik M. Jacobs**

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe called for a snap election in the Japanese Diet on September 25 in the midst of nuclear and ballistic missile threats from North Korea and an emerging political threat from Tokyo Governor and former Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) member Yuriko Koike's new political party, the Party of Hope.¹ Mired by scandals and a dip in public support after some changes to conspiracy laws earlier this year,² Abe called the election more than 12 months earlier than was necessary in the hope that voters would deliver his party a strong endorsement to govern and enact his reforms. Although some commentators viewed Abe's decision as his Theresa May moment because he ran the risk of weakening his authority with a narrower victory,³ voters delivered a strong message of support when they went to the polls on October 22.

Running on a campaign with a heavy emphasis on national security and the implementation of his economic reforms, Shinzo Abe and the ruling LDP won a decisive landslide victory in the snap election. The LDP secured a total of 284 seats in the Diet's lower house. By combining these seats with coalition partner Komeito's 29 seats, Abe's ruling coalition strengthened its political hand and now controls a two-thirds supermajority in the 465-member National Diet's lower house.⁴ Koike's Party of Hope finished in a distant third place in the election with only 50 seats, behind the 55 seats won by the newly formed Constitutional Democratic Party.

The ruling party's supermajority now puts Shinzo Abe in position to make a strong push to revise Japan's constitution to address the role of

Japan's Self-Defence Forces (JSDF).⁵ Abe pledged to revise the constitution's pacifist Article 9 during the campaign,⁶ having begun the process of reshaping the role of the JSDF in 2014 when he allowed for the reinterpretation of Article 9 to permit 'collective self-defence' with allies.⁷ In fulfilling his personal pledge to revise the Constitution, Abe also has the opportunity to achieve one of the LDP's unrealised elements in its 1955 party platform.⁸

Abe has further benefited from a LDP rule change in March 2017 that allows him to serve a third consecutive term as party leader. This rule change extends his tenure in office through to the 2020 Tokyo Olympics whilst his election win protects the LDP majority from facing another general election before 2021, thus giving him more time to pursue his reform agenda.

Canberra should make the most of this golden opportunity to work with Abe and deepen strategic ties with Tokyo, whilst being mindful of domestic factors in Japan that could undermine the prospects of the reform agenda for which Abe sought a mandate at the polls.



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Article 9: prospects for reform

Pacifism has been enshrined in the Japanese constitution ever since 1947, forming a critical part of the country's postwar identity. Article 9—the so-called peace clause—renounces war and states that to accomplish international peace, land, sea and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained.

Abe's proposed reform is to retain the existing two clauses but insert a third clause to legitimise the constitutional status of the JSDF.⁹ This revision would build on 2014 legislation that authorised the JSDF to go abroad, allowing Japan to exercise 'collective self-defence' with its allies. The reform would also close the gap between Article 9 and the JSDF's transformation into a well-equipped, highly technological and formidable force of more than 250,000 personnel.

A constitutional revision would also arguably better help to protect Japan and give Tokyo more options in the face of growing threats from a nuclear North Korea and China's assertive challenges to Japan's territorial integrity at the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. Abe's strong election victory came amid increased threats from North Korean ballistic missile test flights directly over Japan and Pyongyang's successful test of a hydrogen bomb in September.¹⁰ Japanese voters also went to the polls during the 19th Chinese Communist Party Congress when Xi Jinping declared the start of a 'new era' while reiterating that there would be no end to assertive Chinese foreign policy.¹¹ Interestingly, Xi strengthened his hand domestically at the Party Congress around the same time as Abe's election win strengthened his political hand at home.

Reform of the Japanese constitution, however, requires two-thirds approval from both houses of parliament as well as majority support in a referendum vote, so the LDP's supermajority in the Diet does not necessarily make reform a done deal. Abe still needs to build a broad domestic consensus for change.

In the weeks following the election, polling data showed that the Abe Cabinet approval ratings went up five points from September to 49.5 points. At the same time, small majorities of the sample said they did not want Abe to carry out revision of the Japanese constitution (50.2%). The same

respondents said they did not want Abe to lead the LDP for another three-year term (51.2%).¹² This polling suggests that, regardless of how large the LDP coalition's majorities may be, enacting sweeping constitutional revision may be a contentious issue for many Japanese voters.

In the most recent Lowy Institute Poll 86% of Australians said they trust Japan to act responsibly,¹³ so it is likely that modest constitutional reform would be welcomed in Canberra. Australia has long desired Japan to play a greater role in regional security whilst nonetheless being cognisant of the special constraints Japan faces in 'normalising' its defence posture. Abe's election has now provided a timely and valuable fillip for Japan and Australia to broaden and deepen strategic ties in a manner congruent with their shared values and interests as maritime democracies committed to regional prosperity and security.

Quadrilateral cooperation

Prior to the October election, Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono said that Japan must start exerting itself diplomatically to 'draw a bigger strategic picture'.¹⁴ For the past few months, Tokyo has been moving forward in deepening security ties with Australia by trying to revive the former four-country framework between the US, Japan, India and Australia known as the Quadrilateral.

This security grouping of like-minded democracies in the region was first championed by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe during a speech to the Indian Parliament in 2007,¹⁵ fell apart when the Rudd government withdrew from quadrilateral talks due to concerns about China in 2008, and was reborn again as a concept when Abe returned as Prime Minister in 2012.¹⁶ Now the initiative is back on the table, in part to balance China's strategic expansion as it enters Xi Jinping's self-described 'new era' of foreign policy.

At a ministerial level meeting in Manila in August, Kono raised the idea of renewed four party cooperation in the Indo Pacific when meeting with US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj.¹⁷ According to Japanese media sources, Kono discussed the issue again when he met with Indian

officials in September during the United Nations General Assembly in New York. These efforts—and reciprocated interest in New Delhi, Canberra and Washington—culminated in a working level meeting between officials from Japan, Australia, India¹⁸ and the US¹⁹ on the sidelines of the ASEAN Summit in November, with the Japanese delegation chairing the discussion.

Official statements from all four participants emphasised a common vision of a ‘free and open’ Indo Pacific, with shared interests in seven core areas of cooperation including freedom of navigation and overflight, a rules-based regional order and respect for international law as well as nuclear non-proliferation and counter-terrorism.

The task now is to sustain this momentum. The Quadrilateral emerged from the response to the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami²⁰ when the US, Japanese, Australian and Indian navies worked together to coordinate humanitarian assistance. This experience demonstrated the potential for future cooperation, leading to the inaugural Quadrilateral Security Dialogue in May 2007 and joint Malabar Exercises in September. But the Quadrilateral has not convened since, because the Rudd government withdrew following pressure from China.

Ahead of the ASEAN Summit in November, Foreign Minister Bishop said that it would be ‘natural’ to discuss a multilateral grouping between Australia, Japan, the US and India because they are like-minded democracies committed to stability and security in the Indo Pacific region.²¹ However, an Australian commitment to a revived Quadrilateral will need bipartisan support if the grouping is to be sustained.

North Korea and China

Kim Jong-un has threatened the United States with nuclear strikes many times over the years, has vowed to ‘sink’ Japan,²² and famously pledged to turn Seoul into a ‘sea of fire’, but North Korea’s latest nuclear and ballistic missile threats have expanded outside of Northeast Asia and now include Australia. After Foreign Minister Julie Bishop expressed support for the US policy of considering all options against North Korea, including use of force, the North Korean Foreign Ministry threatened Australia too, saying it ‘would

not be able to avoid disaster’ if it aligned itself with the US.²³

At the same time, the Japanese public is acutely aware of the threats North Korea poses to Japan after ballistic missile tests over the archipelago and a successful hydrogen bomb test, so working with Canberra to counter Pyongyang is an obvious way forward for Australia and Japan to work together in the post-Japanese election environment.

In addition to his commitment to equipping Japan with more missile defense systems,²⁴ Shinzo Abe has been one of the world leaders calling for tighter sanctions on North Korea in response to their nuclear weapons programs. Malcolm Turnbull shared this sentiment recently, saying that Australia needs to maintain economic pressure on North Korea.²⁵ Defence and sanctions cooperation on North Korea represent a major opportunity for Japan and Australia to deepen their relationship in the short-term.

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In the longer-term, if China is able to achieve its new assertive foreign policy as laid out by Xi Jinping at the latest Communist Party Congress, Japan and Australia will have to find more ways to work together to deal with the consequences of an even more activist China outside of the already controversial South and East China Seas.

At the Communist Party Congress, Xi revealed a grand strategy for China’s rise which included details about how it would address its military growth and policy actions. In his three-hour long address to political leaders, he set the goal for the People’s Liberation Army to achieve mechanisation by 2020, modernisation by 2035, and to become a world-class military by 2050.²⁶ Xi touted the South China Sea as one of his accomplishments and also discussed China’s role as a ‘global leader’.²⁷

With Japan’s and Australia’s commitment to maintaining the current rules-based system in the region and supporting freedom of navigation, there could be more challenges that push Tokyo and Canberra closer together in the future to address growing Chinese assertiveness. With only 13% of

Japanese²⁸ having a favourable view of China and 46% of Australians saying it is likely China will become a military threat to Australia in the next 20 years,²⁹ dealing with China may become a salient issue among the general public in both countries.

Conclusion

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's snap election triumph in October allowed him to reassert his dominance of the Japanese political system and also sets the stage for him to enact true reforms to Japan's security posture through revising Article 9 of the Japanese constitution. Abe's victory protects the LDP majority from another general election before 2021 and therefore gives him more time to enact his campaign pledge to revise the constitution.

Japan's efforts to include Australia in regional multilateral frameworks along with shared treaty ally the United States and fellow democratic state India show that Japan is serious in engaging Australia at the strategic level. But there has yet to be any major policy changes in either capital city to change the way the two partners interact with each other. The resounding re-election of Abe could provide fresh impetus for new cooperation mechanisms between Japan and Australia, although a lot of these future mechanisms will hinge on how Japan is treated in the new Australian foreign policy white paper—forthcoming at the time of writing—and how it compares to previous defence white papers.

Endnotes

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