Japan-Australia Security Cooperation: Getting Closer, Getting Harder

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Looking at the development of Japan-Australia relations from an Australian perspective, the most outstanding change in the last five years has been the rapid increase and institutionalization of security ties between the two long-standing partners in the Asia Pacific. The highlight of this new bilateral focus came in March 2007 when Prime Minister Abe and Prime Minister Howard signed the Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation, the first security cooperation agreement post-war Japan has signed with any country beyond the United States.1

There are powerful global and regional forces pushing Australia and Japan closer together on security issues that are directly reflected in the nature and areas of closer security cooperation between the two countries in the last five years. These external forces have been aided by domestic political change in Japan, including the Koizumi-Abe era push for a more assertive and confident Japan globally and the DPJ’s choice of Maehara Seiji and then later Ozawa Ichiro, both conservative security thinkers, as their leaders. Japanese politics no longer offers the pacifist Left an institutionalized political voice. These political changes have allowed significant reform of Japan’s introverted security posture including the elevation of the Japan Defense Agency to a Ministry of Defense. Former Defense Minister Ishiba Shigeru even ran within the LDP to become Prime Minister Fukuda Yasuo’s successor.

These two changes have permitted Japan-Australia relations to become more balanced between the healthy and diverse economic bilateral economic partnership (Japan has been Australia’s largest export market for each of the last 40 years), the strong record of diplomatic cooperation globally and regionally and a traditionally weak and uninstitutionalised defence and security relationship. The traditional weakness of this last leg is ironic as the ANZUS alliance has always been intimately linked to the US-Japan alliance; the two are the so-called southern and northern anchors of the US security presence in the Western Pacific2. Furthermore, the formation of ANZUS provided Australia with the confidence to negotiate the 1957 commerce agreement with Japan that underpins the thriving bilateral economic relationship. The two countries’ dependent alliance relationships with the United States underpins their shared diplomatic commitment to Asia-Pacific regionalism. In May 2008, Prime Minister Fukuda, while speaking at a conference on the future of Asia captured this shared feeling when he referred to the Pacific Ocean as ‘an inland sea’.3

More ironically, at the same time that Japan-Australia defence and security relations are becoming

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—26—
closer and more interlinked, changes within the Asia Pacific and within the two countries may combine to make it harder to maintain these closer security links and the traditionally strong diplomatic partnership between Japan and Australia. Just as the two countries are finally getting closer in security and defence terms, they may find themselves being pulled apart. This essay will start by looking at some of the global and regional forces driving this closer cooperation over the last five years, then at four examples of closer security cooperation and end by looking at some countervailing forces that may push Japan and Australia apart.

**Smaller, more intense world, broader, more intense alliance**

Four global and regional changes have been very influential in the new higher level and more diverse forms of security cooperation between Japan and Australia. As one should when looking at Japanese and Australian security policies, we will start with their respective alliances with the United States.

Clearly with the end of the Cold War, the US alliance system in the Western Pacific is not weakening but rather alliance partners are expected to support US security interests well beyond the confines of the Western Pacific. Japan, despite the much stricter confines of Article 9, found this out, painfully, in the first Gulf War fought under the name of the United Nations. Japan’s contributions to the War in Iraq of active personnel to the conflict zone, the second largest deployment from Asia after South Korea, clearly showed this recognition, especially as the War in Iraq was not fought under the name of the United Nations. Japan’s alliance-derived contribution to the War in Iraq permitted Japan and Australia to greatly deepen their security cooperation on the ground. The Japanese non-combat deployment to southern Iraq was supported/protected by Australian troops upon a request for this assistance made by Japan to Australia.

The rationales for Australia’s and Japan’s commitment to Iraq were both based on their alliance relationship with the United States, and these deployments allowed Japan and Australia to cooperate militarily in a manner they had never done before. For Japan, this was a watershed moment as the deployment to Iraq was so different to Japan’s response to the Gulf War and so different to pacifist assumptions about limits on Japanese foreign policy. For Australia, it was a watershed as Japan is the only country to have ever attacked Australian territory yet, six decades later, Australia found itself supporting Japanese soldiers in a war zone in Iraq.

Second, the terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September, 2001 triggered a much greater sense of concern with terrorism around the world and particularly in countries that suffered deaths of citizens in the 11 September attacks such as Australia and Japan. These concerns developed a clear Southeast Asian focus for Australia and Japan after the first (then second) set of bombings in Bali, Indonesia, and growing concerns of maritime terrorism in the Malacca Straits bottleneck. The first Bali bombings led to the death of 88 Australians. The Malacca Straits is the single most important sea lane of communication for energy-dependent Japan.

This shared concern with terrorism in and emanating from Southeast Asia has led both Japan
and Australia to become more deeply involved with the stuttering peace process in the Southern Philippines, with Japan even sending a development assistance official to join the International Monitoring Teams in the southern Philippines. Both Japan and Australia have also boosted their aid allocations to the southern Philippines.

Concerns over the Malacca Straits and the seas in Southeast Asia have led both countries to focus much more attention on strengthening the coast guards of the littoral states and on supporting greater regional monitoring of the Malacca Straits. For Japan, this has meant that the Japanese Coast Guard, not the Maritime Self Defense Force, has become much more active outside Japan's territorial waters in both providing coast guards vessels to the states of maritime Southeast Asia and developing a more permanent presence in Southeast Asia itself. This is truly new territory for the Japanese Coast Guard.

Third, just as Japan and Australia rapidly and actively responded to the 1997 Asian financial crisis (a regional financial tsunami), both were at the forefront of the response to the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami. Japan, Australia, the United States and India (itself a victim of the tsunami) rapidly joined together and created the 'Control Group' to help manage the initial international response to the tsunami, especially in and around Aceh, Indonesia, the worst-hit area. The desire and ability to respond to the tsunami reflected the growing commitment and capability of both countries to addressing non-traditional security threats like terrorism and natural disasters and Australia's and Japan's shared interest in Indonesian stability and development.

Fourth, North Korea's nuclear-tipped belligerence and the slow, stuttering process of the six-party talks have also brought Australia and Japan closer together. Both are active participants in the US-led Proliferation Security Initiative aimed at interdicting sea-based proliferation of weapons of mass destruction from North Korea. Australia and Japan were also two of the first countries to respond to North Korea's nuclear test by banning all trade with North Korea and, in the case of Australia, withdrawing its diplomatic representation from Pyongyang.

The growing threat from North Korea is of course, much more deeply felt in Japan and has certainly played a significant role in the Japanese public's growing willingness to consider constitutional reform. Australia's top three export markets are Japan, China and South Korea respectively, giving Australia a vital strategic interest in the Korean peninsula. North Korea's Taepo-Dong 2 missiles, theoretically, could strike Australia and Australia still has treaty (and likely alliance) commitments to South Korea.

**Transforming interests into institutions**

These four forces have contributed directly to three important institutional developments in Japan-Australia relations and one potential development that many in Canberra hope takes place. Again, we will start with institutional developments in the two countries alliance relationships with the security guarantor, the United States. In June 2006, the foreign ministers of Japan and Australia and the American Secretary of State met in Sydney for the inaugural annual meeting of the new
ministerial-level Trilateral Strategic Dialogue. This dialogue institutionalized the close links between the two alliances as it 'connected the spokes' of the American hub-and-spokes system of alliances in the Western Pacific. This ministerial-level annual dialogue also permits Japan and Australia to gain a much better appreciation of the alliance relationship of the other and to work together on common messages to convey to the Secretary of State. In the APEC leaders’ meeting in Sydney in 2007, at the request of President Bush, the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue was further enhanced by a trilateral meeting between the leaders of the United States, Japan and Australia, a meeting President Bush suggested should take place at every APEC leaders' meeting.

Second, on the back of the Control Group experience and the elevation of the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue in 2006 to ministerial level, Prime Minister Abe of Japan suggested a Quadrilateral Strategic Dialogue between Japan, the United States, Australia and India. Foreign Minister Aso’s 2007 idea of an ‘arc of freedom and prosperity’ in the Asia Pacific of major democracies also resonates with this quadrilateral grouping. Finally, such a dialogue would marry the interests of Japan, the United States and Australia for India to play a larger and more institutionalized role in the Asia Pacific and India’s desire to be allowed to play such a role in line with its ‘Look East’ policy. So far, the quadrilateral idea has stayed largely as a point of discussion. However, in 2007, there was an informal meeting of senior officials from these four countries at the ASEAN Regional Forum. In September 2007, the navies of these four countries and Singapore also participated in the Malabar 07 joint exercise in India’s Bay of Bengal.

Third, following on from the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue on the Control Group experience, in March 2007, Japan and Australia signed the Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation on the same bilateral visit that Japan and Australia agreed to commence negotiations on a free trade agreement. Prime Minister Howard signed this agreement personally while in Tokyo despite it not being a treaty-level document. This contrasts to the fact that in November 2006 Foreign Minister Downer signed on behalf of Australia the Lombok Treaty concerning security cooperation with Indonesia. Prime Minister Howard’s personal diplomacy in support of the joint declaration reflects Australia’s long-standing support for post-war Japan, as a fellow alliance partner of the United States, to play a larger and more active role in regional and global security.

The joint declaration establishes an annual set of 2X2 meetings between the two countries’ foreign and defence ministers. The elevation of the security relationship through the joint declaration, the establishment of annual 2X2 meetings and the development of a common action for future cooperation under the joint declaration are the clearest signa of deepening defence and security ties between Japan and Australia. This is undoubtedly a more symbolically important and difficult step for Japan given its constitutional restrictions and the sensitivities of its closest neighbours and own population.

A final institutional development that would further deepen bilateral defence and security ties has not yet happened, but is on the drawing board. The February 13 agreement on initial steps for the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula struck in 2007 during the six-party talks on North Korea established a working group (one of six) on the future transformation of the six-party talks process into a permanent regional security forum for Northeast Asia. Russia is the chair-country of
this particular workshop and so far little concrete has taken place as the initial steps laid out in the February 13 agreement for Pyongyang have not been taken.

Despite not being a member of the six-party talks and the uncertain potential for their transformation into a regional security body, Australia has expressed strong interest in this possibility and the strong desire to be included as a member if such a forum does eventuate. Australia would definitely need Japanese support to gain membership in such a regional forum if it is established. Such a forum, especially as it includes both Russia and China, would provide much more material for discussion and coordination in both the Trilateral Security Dialogue and the 2X2 meetings between Japan and Australia.

Countervailing forces

All of these institutional advances in Japan-Australia defence and security cooperation took place under the Howard administration in Australia that has since lost office. As well, China has voiced official concerns over the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue, the quadrilateral meeting of senior officials at the ASEAN Regional Forum meeting in 2007 and the Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation.

These two factors together underline one of the potential forces pushing Japan and Australia further apart. Under the 11-year Howard administration, Australia's foreign policy hierarchy was quite clear and consistent with earlier governments. The United States was the most important bilateral relationship for Australia and Japan was the most important in Asia. It is less clear that the new Rudd administration has the same worldview and doubts about this were deepened when Prime Minister Rudd visited both the United States and China on his first major overseas trip, but not Japan. Likewise, at APEC 2007 in Sydney, then opposition leader met with President Bush and President Hu Jintao but not with Prime Minister Abe.

Japanese public opinion is more ambivalent towards China's rising power than Australia. This is not a surprise as Japan is a major power, a neighbour of China and has a history of conflict and competition with China. Australia is none of the above and China is now Australia's largest trading partner and soon likely to become the largest export market. Differences over addressing China's rising economic, diplomatic and military power could place serious pressure on Japan-Australia relations, especially in areas like security cooperation where China expresses concern.

The new Rudd administration has committed itself to the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue and the Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation. Australia also invited Japan to co-chair the newly formed International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament. However, at the inaugural meeting of China-Australia strategic dialogue in early 2008, Foreign Minister Smith, standing next to Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, announced that Australia would not propose the next meeting of the Quadrilateral Strategic Dialogue. This certainly took the Indians by surprise. The Rudd government also has not made it clear what its stance is on participating in the US' missile defense program that the Howard government supported in principle.
While differences over China may, if a substantial gap exists, undermine the grand strategic reasons for close Japan-Australia security relations, lesser but more concrete challenges also lay ahead. First, in the past decade, Australia has seen itself become much more deeply involved in providing security to the weak and unstable countries of the South Pacific, including the new country of Timor Leste. Growing commitments in the South Pacific are behind the continued commitment to real spending increases on Australian defence and to the rapid growth in Australia's aid budget. These 'neighbourhood' problems are reshaping the deployment and doctrine of the Australian Defence Force in ways that are less amenable to closer security cooperation with Japan. Japan is not a major security actor in the South Pacific and has fewer vital interests at play in this globally peripheral region.

Finally, Japan's own fiscal situation and the demands of demographics may well limit Japan's ability to contribute more widely and actively to regional and global security. Ironically, Japanese politics may be shifting towards supporting a more 'normal' security and defence posture befitting a major regional and global power at the same time that domestic demands on the Japanese budget undercut its ability to carry out such a role.

Closer security cooperation between Japan and Australia is one of the strongest and most positive developments in the bilateral relationship in the last five years. However, despite its novelty, it already faces strong countervailing forces that will test its durability. In security matters, Japan and Australia are getting closer together at the same time that staying together is becoming more challenging.

[Notes]

(1) This declaration can be downloaded from http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/australia/joint0703.html (visited on 12 September 2008)


(3) This speech can be downloaded from http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/speech08052.html (visited on 12 September 2008)

(4) A recent JIIA Commentary by Hirabayashi Hiroshi revisits the negative reaction to Japan's commitments to the first Gulf War and its impact on Japan's international security policy since then. This work can be downloaded at http://www.jiia.or.jp/en_commentary/200809/121.html (visited 15 September 2008)

(5) India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands lie off the coast of Indonesia and Myanmar and were severely affected by the tsunami.


(7) For more information about this large naval exercise, please visit http://www.india-defence.com/reports-3519 (visited on 14 September 2008)