



Asia Pacific Bulletin

Number 101 | March 17, 2011

Australia and Japan: Allies in Partnership

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The post-Cold War era in the Asia-Pacific has not witnessed the triumph of low over high politics. Rather, it has seen the simultaneous intensification of both economic integration, and security cooperation and competition. This is true both at the level of the region and for China and most other countries in the region.

In response, the Asia-Pacific has witnessed in this period the strengthening of key alliance relationships, the diversification and networking of security relationships between like-minded—or like-concerned—states, with many regional militaries boosting their force projection capabilities. Regional states under the auspices of ASEAN have also started to build a formal regional security architecture symbolized by the first meeting of the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus (United States, China, Japan, Russia, India, Australia, South Korea, and New Zealand) process last year in Vietnam.

Tokyo and Canberra have been active on each one of these fronts. The burgeoning of their bilateral strategic partnership since 2004 is one of the best examples of how the shift of global power and competition from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and throughout the Asia-Pacific itself, is augmenting security cooperation. It is also a sign of success for the Pentagon's post-Cold War efforts to link together more effectively its key alliance and security partner relationships throughout the region.

The initiative for a more robust strategic partnership came from Australian and Japanese Prime Ministers John Howard and Junichiro Koizumi respectively, whose similar worldviews, personal chemistry, and good relations with President George W. Bush helped to catalyze the relationship. 2004 was a watershed year in the Japan-Australia bilateral relationship. This was the year that Australian troops provided security for Japan's ground-breaking deployment of Self-Defense Forces' personnel to Iraq after a personal request from Koizumi to Howard. Eleven months later, Japanese and Australian defense forces again found themselves working very closely together, along with the United States and India, as members of the quadrilateral group coordinating the international response to the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami.

These formative joint operations created bottom-up pressure for a more institutionalized bilateral security relationship, while building trust and confidence between the Australian Defense Force and the Japanese Self-Defense Forces. The elevation in 2006 of the trilateral security dialogue between the United States, Japan and Australia to the ministerial level added further momentum. In March 2007, in John Howard's last prime ministerial visit to Japan, he and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe signed the Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation. Three years later, under governments of different ideological hues, Tokyo and Canberra signed an Acquisitions

Malcolm Cook, Dean of the School of International Studies, Flinders University, and **Thomas S. Wilkins**, Lecturer at the Centre for International Security Studies, University of Sydney, outline the growing strategic partnership between Australia and Japan, suggesting that this is “also a sign of success for the Pentagon's post-Cold War efforts to link together more effectively its key alliance and security partner relationships throughout the region.”



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and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) treaty at the third annual “2+2” meeting between defense and foreign ministers.

The drivers behind these moves are easy to discern. The primary ones are within Japan itself. Japan has become increasingly proactive in its foreign policy, as it begins to loosen the constitutional and psychological shackles imposed in the post-World War II period. Japan is now more willing and able to engage in security cooperation with choice states around the region beyond its cornerstone alliance with the United States. Australia, India, and more quietly South Korea, are the first partners of choice. The Japan-Australia joint declaration served as the template for Japan’s pronouncement with India a year later, as it did for Australia’s weaker announcements with South Korea and India in 2009.

At the regional and global level, Tokyo and Canberra recognize that Japan and the United States are both in decline relative to the rising power of China, and the inexorable advance of other states. This shared understanding of the changing power relativities is a strong foundation behind the bilateral strategic partnership. For Japan, the recognition that for the first time in its modern history it is no longer “number one” in Asia strongly supports Tokyo’s increasingly assertive foreign and security policy, both at the elite political and bureaucratic level and at that of popular opinion.

Addressing the rise of China and North Korea’s nuclear-tipped thuggery, ensuring maritime security, and building an effective regional security architecture unite Tokyo and Canberra. These issues also reconfirm the benefits to Australia and Japan, two beneficiaries of American extended deterrence, of the United States staying “constructively engaged” in the Western Pacific. In addition, there is recognition of the consequent need for allies and partners of the United States to do more to help themselves, and by extension the United States. The Japan-Australia strategic partnership, their bipartisan support for the US-led regional ballistic missile defense architecture and the recent decision by both states to increase their force projection capabilities all address this desire and need for all parties concerned.

The prospects for deepened Japan-Australia cooperation are sunny, but not dazzling. The ACSA success has been followed up by ongoing negotiations to sign a bilateral information sharing treaty, and their bilateral strategic partnership has become quietly entrenched in the foreign and defense establishments of both countries. It is clear that, aided by the 2007 Joint Declaration’s annual action plans, the Australia-Japan bilateral relationship has become bureaucratically self-sustaining, and that the relationship itself enjoys solid bipartisan domestic political support in both countries.

However, the Japan-Australia strategic partnership may have plateaued politically. It is difficult to see how both states could create a more formal, especially military, pact without arousing the explicit ire of Beijing or running up against the constraints of Japan’s “peace constitution.” Since both countries are increasingly dependent on the Chinese economy for their own wellbeing, such a pact would be a provocative step. Indeed, Canberra, isolated by geography and history from China, feels less threatened and may have less appetite for overt hedging against China, while Tokyo, which lies in the first island chain off China’s coast, may have reached the constitutional limits when it comes to security cooperation with Australia.

This article stems from a Lowy Institute report entitled “The Quiet Achiever: Australia-Japan Security Relations” that the two authors published in January 2011 with financial support from the Australia-Japan Foundation.