

The Abe and Abbott show: a meeting of minds and interests

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The ANZUS Treaty was signed 63 years ago by Australia, New Zealand and the United States, in part as a counter to the US security treaty with Japan and the final peace agreement following the end of World War II. ANZUS then was intended to stand against any possible resurgence of Japanese military power in the Asia Pacific region.



Today the strategic partnership between Australia and Japan [is described by Australia as](#) ^[1] its 'closest and most mature in the region', and one that is 'fundamentally important to both countries' strategic and economic interests'. And though Japan's language is not quite as effusive, [the same thinking is there](#) ^[2]: 'In recent years, the two countries have also strengthened political and security cooperation, which has made them a strategic partner in the Asia Pacific region' and [the relationship is 'special'](#) ^[3] according to Prime Minister Abe's address to a joint sitting of Australia's Parliament.

In partnership with the United States, the two countries are forming a 'strategic triangle' which has been variously interpreted as a return to Cold War fears of a military enemy, an attempt to 'contain' China, or an unthinking 'because we can' approach to strategic relationships.

There is no question that Japan, the United States and Australia all sense that the region is more dangerous today than it has been in recent decades and that military power is one way of countering that danger. But a general sense of unease doesn't explain the effusive language, especially coming from Australia. The most likely reason for the warmth in the Japan–Australia relationship is that both countries' leaders are instinctively inclined towards [hard power](#) ^[4] and a

partnership with a like-minded state reinforces and legitimises this preference.

An enhanced defence relationship following Abe's visit is set to include a deal with Japan to transfer submarine technology to Australia to help bolster Australia's frayed submarine ambitions, and may also see more joint military exercises and personnel exchanges between the armed forces. Less likely, but possible, is a formal treaty commitment by each country to support the other in time of conflict.

A submarine technology agreement will be substantive if it works, but this is an area in which Australia has experienced substantial problems in the past, and if things don't turn out as hoped, it may sour relations between the countries. The rest of the relationship is as much about showing the world that Australia has regional stature and that Japan is a 'normal' country as it is about [ensuring security](#) ^[6] for the countries or for the region.

Alongside the military relationship is the economic one.

The Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) signed between Japan and Australia in April 2014 gave Australia increased access to the lucrative Japanese market, but it is widely seen as a [weak agreement](#) ^[6]. The conclusion of an agreement was thought to be necessary because Prime Minister Abbott was visiting Japan, but the EPA is unhelpful in terms of the wider aims (not necessarily held by Japan) of the on-going Trans-Pacific Partnership trade negotiations. The EPA should be seen as symbolic of the relationship rather than as a substantive step towards opening trade in the region. No doubt the EPA will enhance Australia's market access in the short term, but if it sets back a comprehensive regional free trade agreement, the long-term cost could be high for the entire region, Australia and Japan included.

But a closer trade relationship does not require enhanced defence cooperation. In some respects, then, the moves to strengthen the Australia–Japan strategic relationship is a short game designed to show solidarity with a like-minded government and with the United States against a China which has its own regional ambitions. Military links are unlikely to do more than enhance the two countries' defence industries, while the structure of the EPA is unlikely to result in significant economic benefits.

Australia–Japan [ties are strong](#) ^[7], with or without formal agreements, and it is hard not to think that the energy behind recent defence and economic closeness derives more from political considerations than from substantive economic and security benefits.

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[1] is described by Australia as: http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/japan/japan_brief.html

[2] the same thinking is there: <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/australia/data.html>

[3] the relationship is

'special

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<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/policy/prime-minister-shinzo-abe-vows-japan-will-never-again-follow-the-path-of-war/story-fn59nm2j-1226981494689>

[4] hard power:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/07/07/evolution-not-revolution-for-japans-military-posture/>

[5] ensuring security:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/07/07/shinzo-abes-australia-visit-and-stability-in-asia/>

[6] weak agreement:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/04/15/japan-and-australia-beef-up-relations/>

[7] ties are strong:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/07/06/the-new-australia-japan-relationship/>

[8] Jim Rolfe: <http://www.victoria.ac.nz/hppi/about/staff/jim-rolfe>