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Japan and Australia

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Introduction

Japan and Australia have been strengthening their security relationship almost continuously from the end of the Cold War through to the present day. Originally, cooperation between the two countries centered on peacekeeping operations (PKO) and non-traditional security issues, but has gradually expanded even to encompass traditional security cooperation with an eye to military preparedness. Today, it is not unusual for the two countries' relationship to be described as a "quasi-alliance." Some consider that in practical terms at least, Japan-Australia cooperation is now comparable to a formal alliance.

Why has Japan-Australia security cooperation strengthened to such a degree? This article sheds light on this question primarily by examining three factors: the rise of China, alliance relationships with the United States, and Japan and Australia's shared view of what constitutes a desirable international and regional order.

One of the factors behind the strengthening of Japan-Australia security cooperation after the Cold War, and especially since the 2000s, was undoubtedly the structural change in international politics commonly described as the rise of China. As China's challenge to the international order grew stronger from the latter half of the 2000s, Japan and Australia began pursuing bilateral negotiations and institution-building

toward security and defense cooperation in addition to Japan-US-Australia strategic dialogue. Both Japan and Australia also set about strengthening their own defense capabilities, informed by growing concerns over China.

However, there were also significant differences between two countries in terms of perception of the threat China posed. With its geographical distance from China and strong economic ties with it, Australia was disinclined to aggravate China or to become embroiled in Japan-China disputes in the East China Sea. In contrast to the souring of Japan-China relations owing to historical issues and the disagreement over the Senkaku Islands, Australia, at least on the surface, had maintained good relations with China not only economically but also politically and militarily until the mid-2010s.

The fact that Japan and Australia's security cooperation was strengthened almost continuously despite this "China gap" between the two countries is attributable largely to the alliance relationships that both countries hold with the United States. Japan and Australia both gain vital advantages from the security provided by the United States and its maintenance of a military presence in the region. Japan-Australia security cooperation was positioned as one way of strengthening or supplementing these alliances and military presence. Australia also considered defense engagement with Japan to be essential in light of the high likelihood of

Australia being involved in the security of Japan and Northeast Asia by virtue of the Australia, New Zealand and United States (ANZUS) Security Treaty.

This does not necessarily mean that the strengthening of the Japan-Australia security cooperation was motivated by concerns over “abandonment” by the United States. In addition to their respective alliances with the United States as part of the US-centered “hub and spokes” configuration, both Japan and Australia had a strong intrinsic interest in maintenance of the free and open international order underpinned by this configuration. Both countries also supported liberal values such as freedom, democracy, and the rule of law. Thus, they proactively and constructively supported the US-led order in the region and sought to maintain and strengthen it. This “perception of order” held in common across the two countries had a crucial role to play in the strengthening of their security cooperation.

This article proceeds below to review the timeline of Japan-Australia security cooperation since the end of the Cold War, explaining the processes whereby this bilateral cooperation evolved to the point that it is described as a “quasi-alliance” relationship. The paper then examines Japan-Australia security cooperation since the Prime Ministership of Yoshihide Suga in Japan, identifying the challenges facing bilateral security cooperation and commenting on prospects for its future.

Japan-Australia security cooperation after the Cold War

The end of the Cold War was proclaimed at the Malta Summit between the United States and the Soviet Union in December 1989. A delegation from the Australian Department of Defence promptly visited Japan in March of the following year, initiating an unofficial “strategic dialogue” with the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The defense ministers of Japan and Australia each visited their counterpart’s country in 1990 and 1992 respectively, and defense exchanges were initiated in areas such as PKO seminars and joint exercises. Official bilateral talks between foreign affairs and defense officials, and among defense officials, were launched in February 1996. The countries agreed to hold regular Prime Ministerial meetings from 1997, and committed to promoting defense exchanges, information sharing, and cooperation on security issues in the region.

One of the reasons Australia moved closer to Japan at this time was the Japan-US alliance. Australian government officials moved to ensure that Japan remained within the boundaries of its alliance with the US after the end of the Cold War. This was vitally important to Australia as it sought to ensure the US military presence was sustained beyond the Cold War era. Moreover, especially from the time of the Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1995–96, a small number

of policymakers in Australia were thinking strategically about strengthening security relationships with other democratic countries, Japan included, in preparation for the future rise of China. Australia's approach to Japan was thus informed by considerations including the maintenance of US presence in the region hinging on the Japan-US alliance, and hedging against China's future rise.

In contrast, this kind of strategic thinking was rare among policymakers in Japan. For Japan the importance of Australia lay in the general fact that it was a US ally and part of the Western bloc of countries, as well as sharing a regional/international interest in PKO, demilitarization, and nuclear non-proliferation. Australia's active support for Japan's expanding regional role was important especially as Japan strengthened its involvement in the international order-building during and after the Gulf War. As early as the Diplomatic Bluebook of 1991, Japan indicated that Australia was "an indispensable partner" for Japan in tackling regional and global issues.

In this way, the move toward direct security cooperation between Japan and Australia was less a reaction to China as a direct "threat" and more a product of cooperation on regional and global issues. Notably, the two countries bolstered their working relationship on issues such as counterterrorism and non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in the course of contributing actively to the United States-led

"war on terror" following the multiple terrorist attacks on the US in 2001. The momentum for stronger bilateral cooperation on security was also heightened through the direct cooperation between Japan's Self-Defense Forces (SDF) and the Australian military in peacekeeping operations in East Timor beginning in 2002, humanitarian aid and disaster relief activities following the earthquake off the coast of Sumatra, Indonesia in December 2004, and the humanitarian and reconstruction assistance to Iraq in 2005.

As China's rise became more pronounced from the middle of the 2000s, a line of thinking began to emerge in Japan that placed cooperation with Australia in a strategic context. Elected Prime Minister in September 2006, Shinzo Abe espoused a "value diplomacy" approach, strengthening collaboration with Australia, India and other democratic countries in addition to the United States. Japan-US-Australia-India cooperation, as promoted both by Prime Minister Abe and his diplomatic advisors, was clearly founded on geopolitical thinking with an eye to China. The Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation was released in March 2007, committing to a stronger relationship between the two countries in a variety of fields.

Australia was also active in promoting the strengthening of security ties with Japan, both as a hedge against the future rise of China and with a view to bolstering the United States' military presence in the region. At the same time,

under Prime Minister John Howard, the Australian government was also moving to strengthen economic relations with China, making it wary of excessive provocation of China. Kevin Rudd, the Prime Minister after Howard, was also proactive in strengthening his country's alliance with the United States and security cooperation between Australia, Japan and the US, but declared that Australia would not participate in the Japan-US-Australia-India security cooperation proposed by Prime Minister Abe on the grounds that it may provoke China unnecessarily.

Ironically, it was immediately after this time that China's hardline stance on external relations became entrenched. China dispatched vessels to the area around the Senkaku Islands on an ongoing basis from 2008, and in December of that year two of the vessels entered Japan's territorial waters for the first time. In March 2009, there was a near miss between the US naval survey ship the USNS Impeccable and five Chinese vessels, which engaged in obstructive behavior. In April of the same year, Australia issued a new defense White Paper that sounded an unprecedentedly strong warning about the rapid modernization of China's military capabilities and its lack of transparency, and embarked on a large-scale military strengthening known as "Force 2030." Some observers took exception to the harsh assessment of China expressed in the White Paper, but ultimately this view of China relations was backed by none

other than Prime Minister Rudd, who had long been seen as sympathetic to China.

Consequently, the close partnership between Japan and Australia continued to grow stronger even after the advent of the Democratic Party of Japan government in September 2009. Security cooperation was gradually institutionalized through developments such as the signing of an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) in May 2010, and an Information Security Agreement (ISA) in May 2012. Following the Great East Japan Earthquake disaster of March 2011, Australia sent as many as three of its stable of four C-17 transportation aircraft to Japan and undertook disaster support operations together with the United States. Later, when Japan resolved to send SDF personnel to South Sudan on PKO, Australia dispatched two military personnel to South Sudan to engage in provision of information relating to the performance of the SDF's duties and to support liaison and coordination with relevant agencies including the United Nations.

The governments formed by both the Democratic Party of Japan and the Australian Labor Party also lent their support to the United States' Asia-Pacific "rebalance," as well as sharing concerns over how China's power was altering the status quo in the East China and South China Seas, emphasizing the importance of the "rule of law" and "rules-based order" in international society. The joint

declaration as a result of the Foreign and Defense Ministerial Consultations (“2+2”) held in Australia for the first time in June 2012 called for China’s responsible and constructive involvement in the “rules-based international order,” as well as confirming that Japan and Australia would promote freedom of the seas, peaceful resolution of disputes, and other aspects of compliance with maritime norms. In this way, despite their differences in perception of China as a threat and approach to relations with China, Japan and Australia were in complete agreement regarding the maintenance of US military presence, and the preservation and strengthening of the rules-based order that this presence supported.

Japan-Australia security cooperation had thus already been strengthened significantly by the time Shinzo Abe returned as Prime Minister in December 2012. Nonetheless, had Abe not become Prime Minister, the Japan-Australia relationship may not have grown as strong as it is today. Together with Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott, Prime Minister Abe elevated the Japan-Australia relationship to the status of a “special strategic partnership,” expanding joint military exercises and robustly promoting cooperation on defense equipment and technology—especially initiatives toward the joint development of Australia’s next generation of naval submarines. Prime Ministers Abe and Abbott also worked to strengthen the bilateral relationship overall, including

on the economic front, bringing to completion the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) negotiations that had been in train since 2007.

The cooperation on joint submarine development initiated by the two Prime Ministers was thwarted in April 2016 when Australia selected France to manufacture its next generation of naval submarines. The failure of Japanese submarines to gain selection was attributed, among other things, to mismatches in technology and capability, as well as insufficient experience on the Japanese side and the absence of support from the United States. Moreover, there were some concerns in Japan over the possibility of the joint submarine development leading to leakage of Japan’s most precious technologies, while some in Australia expressed doubts regarding the enthusiasm of Japanese companies and their production capacity overseas. It is also said that Japan’s initial presentation of a downgraded proposal for its Soryu-class submarines was a major disappointment to the Australian side. The underlying cause of this breakdown in submarine cooperation was the mutual lack of trust between the two parties.

Even so, the strengthening of bilateral security cooperation persisted, as China continued to challenge the existing order. In January 2017 ACSA was revised and the decision was taken to apply it to situations other than humanitarian aid and disaster relief. When the newly

inaugurated President Donald Trump announced the United States' withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in the same month, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe collaborated closely with his Australian counterpart Malcolm Turnbull to persist with the TPP and maintain the free trade system, resulting in the establishment of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) in March 2018. The announcement by Japanese Foreign Affairs Minister Taro Kono of the resumption of the Japan-US-Australia-India security dialogue in October 2017 was met with the full support of both incumbent and opposition parties in Australia. This "Quad" would subsequently become established as the core of the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)" concept espoused by Japan.

In this way, despite changes in government and leadership in both countries, Japan-Australia security cooperation has been strengthened almost continuously since the end of the Cold War. This strengthening has occurred in the context of the rise of China, as well as both countries' alliance relationships with the United States, and a shared perception of the international order. The rise of China in particular, even if not an urgent and direct "threat" to either country, was perceived as a clear challenge to the "rules-based order" led by the United States. Having benefited greatly from this order, both Japan and Australia worked to maintain and bolster it by actively supporting the US presence in

their region and building a broad-ranging and diverse cooperative relationship not limited to the military sphere.

Issues in Japan-Australia security cooperation

Japan-Australia security cooperation has maintained its strong momentum even after the fall of the Abe administration in September 2020. In November of that year, the countries reached an "in-principle agreement" on a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) that had been under negotiation for a period of eight years. The RAA was formally signed by both Prime Ministers in January 2022. Moreover, since June 2021, Japan's SDF has been permitted to protect weapons and other military assets not only of the United States but of Australia as well. The RAA took effect in August 2023, and was first operationalized in the same month, in a US-Australia F-35 deployment exercise held in Australia and the Japan-Australia "Exercise Bushido Guardian 23" held in Japan.

The new Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation announced in October 2022 included statements that Japan and Australia would "consult each other" and "consider measures in response" to contingencies that may affect their sovereignty and regional security interests. These statements resemble the provisions of Articles 3 and 4 of the ANZUS Treaty, which stipulate that the parties shall consult together

and respond to threats in the Pacific. The Declaration does not give rise to the same obligations as a treaty, but is nonetheless symbolic of the strengthening of bilateral relations. Despite having no legally binding force, such a commitment had never before been undertaken by Japan with any country apart from the United States (subsequently, however, Japan issued a similarly-worded joint declaration with the United Kingdom).

Japan and Australia have thus taken steps to render their “quasi-alliance” relationship in a more tangible form, but many issues remain unresolved. The principal of these concerns is the legal constraints on Japan’s security policy. The SDF’s protection of other countries’ military assets, for example, is restricted to “activities that contribute to the defense of Japan.” Leaving aside military contingencies within Japan and on the Korean Peninsula, it is unclear whether or not this provision would apply to contingencies in locations such as the South China Sea. Furthermore, asset protection by the SDF is limited only to “extremely passive and limited use of the minimum weaponry necessary for the purpose of protection from an intrusion that does not amount to a military attack.” This means that the SDF could not use weapons for the purpose of protecting the Australian military when attacked by a foreign force within this framework.

Moreover, paragraph 1 of Article 95 of the Self-Defense Forces Act excludes “locations where combat activities are

currently occurring” and guarantees that protection of assets shall not be “combined with the use of weapons” by parties such as the United States military. In other words, protection of the military assets of other countries under Article 95-2 of the Self-Defense Forces Act is designed for attacks by non-state actors in peacetime or “gray zone” situations, and should be seen as distinct from “alliance” cooperation that envisages a joint response to contingencies. For the SDF to perform such cooperation would require the recognition of an “Survival-Threatening Situation,” by which time the outcome of the conflict may already be decided.

The second issue is the strengthening of the collaboration between the SDF and the Australian military in operational terms. At the aforementioned Japan-Australia 2+2 meeting of June 2021, the two countries’ ministers agreed to “deepening real-world defense cooperation.” In practice, as well as the legislative strengthening described above, the two countries have been moving to improve the mutual operability of the SDF and Australian military. One example of this is the June 2021 signing of a memorandum on midair refueling by the Japan Air Self-Defense Force and Royal Australian Air Force, and the successful compatibility tests conducted during joint exercises in April of the following year. At the Japan-Australia 2+2 in December 2022, the two countries announced that they were considering future deployment of SDF F-35 fighters in patrols of Australia.

Nonetheless, there is no guarantee that the two countries will collaborate more deeply in the event of an actual emergency, regardless of how many such exercises are conducted. For their cooperation to function fully in an emergency situation would surely require more detailed planning with an eye to the type of scenario that may unfold. For a start, Japan and Australia have not instituted documents or frameworks equivalent to those that exist in the case of Japan and the United States, such as the Guidelines for Japan-US Defense Cooperation and the Alliance Coordination Mechanism. Developing the specifics of bilateral cooperation through planning of this type will be crucial in order for Japan-Australia and Japan-US-Australia cooperation to function effectively in an emergency situation.

The final issue is further strengthening of regional engagement. Bolstering Japan-Australia cooperation in the area of defense is certainly important, but this is not the only aspect of bilateral security cooperation. As we have already seen, the two countries have been cooperating across a wide variety of areas including PKO and nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, as well as climate change countermeasures and energy security. This kind of cooperation for regional order building is growing in importance as the existing order is destabilized by the rise of China. Small countries in regions lacking fundamental strengths are especially susceptible to the direct influence of China, and some

observers even point to several countries already being swayed by China in practice. As two of the region's advanced democracies, Japan and Australia build on their existing cooperation to work with other like-minded countries within and beyond the region to provide assistance to smaller countries in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, with a view to preventing a "redrawing" of the regional order by China.

Conclusion

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, along with its invasion of Crimea eight years earlier, sent shockwaves across the world. The way that the rules and norms of state-to-state engagement that international society had woven out of the experience of two world wars was broken so easily, moreover by a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, seemed altogether like a return to the world of the 19th century and prior. In this context, active support for Ukraine is being offered not only by European countries but also Japan, Australia, Korea, and other Indo-Pacific countries committed to preserving the postwar rules-based order.

If the status quo in Europe continues to be changed by force, the impact will sooner or later be felt in the Indo-Pacific region as well. This is why Japan and Australia are working with Europe to limit the extent of change by supporting Ukraine and applying pressure on Russia through sanctions. Surely these

efforts will send an important message to China, which like Russia, has plans to alter the existing order. As Russia's aggression in Ukraine further destabilizes the rules-based order, the true value of Japan-Australia security cooperation as a means to uphold this order will be put to the test.

Reference material

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