

INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGIC PAPERS

The Australia-Japan Security Relationship: valuable partnership or much ado about nothing much?

Group Captain Lindley (Jim) Ghee, OAM

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The author

Group Captain Lindley ('Jim') Ghee joined the RAAF in 1986. His early postings included No. 33 Squadron and No. 36 Squadron. In 1988, he participated in No. 84 Wing's detachment to Kuwait in support of Operation SOUTHERN WATCH. During 2002, he deployed with No. 84 Wing's detachment to Kyrgyzstan, in support of operations in Afghanistan.

In 2003, Group Captain Ghee completed Australian Command and Staff Course, and continued as directing staff throughout 2004. In late 2005, he assumed command of No. 33 Squadron. Later postings included Headquarters Air Lift Group, Director of Joint Project 160 Transition Team, Director Plans/Operations at Headquarters Air Command, and Officer Commanding No. 84 Wing.

Group Captain Ghee has a Bachelor of Science from the University of NSW, and a Masters of Management in Defence Studies from the University of Canberra. He is currently attending the Defence and Strategic Studies Course at the Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies at the Australian Defence College.

Abstract

This paper examines the Australia-Japan security relationship, which it notes has substantially expanded since the end of the Cold War. The paper contends that the bilateral partnership has exceeded the limits that would be seen if it were merely cooperation between two spokes in the US alliance mechanism, arguing that the ongoing growth of bilateral relations is due more to the two countries' shared interests and geostrategic risks in the Indo-Asia-Pacific.

However, it also notes that neither country would likely wish to elevate the current relationship to a formal security treaty, due to common concerns about their respective relations with China. It concludes that the burgeoning areas of bilateral cooperation indicate that the relationship provides value in its own right, while complementing each nation's formal alliance with the US.

The Australia-Japan Security Relationship: valuable partnership or much ado about nothing much?

Introduction

Since the turn of the current millennium, Australia and Japan have developed a remarkably strong strategic security partnership. Cooperative military deployments to Iraq and Sudan, increasing numbers of joint military exercises, and the signing of bilateral cross-servicing and intelligence-sharing agreements are some of the outward signs of an increasingly-close security relationship.¹ The landmark 2007 Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation between the two countries was a significant signal of a formal collaborative approach to Indo-Asia-Pacific security matters.²

However, it is unlikely that either country would wish to elevate the current relationship to a formal security treaty, due to common concerns about damaging relations with China.³ Some commentators consider that this relationship has grown primarily at the behest of the US, prompted by its recognition of changed international security conditions—exemplified by the 2001 terrorist attacks on the US, and China’s growing military capability in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region.⁴ Therefore, the increasing closeness between Australia and Japan could be seen as simply closer cooperation between two ‘spokes’ within the US ‘hub-and-spoke’ alliance system in the Asia-Pacific.

This paper argues that despite the influence of the US in initiating a greater bilateral security relationship between Australia and Japan, the ongoing growth of bilateral relations is due more to the two countries’ shared interests and geostrategic risks in the Indo-Asia-Pacific. It examines the development of the Australia-Japan security relationship into its current form, considers the nations’ respective security relationships within the US alliance system, and assesses whether the bilateral partnership adds value to the security of the Indo-Asia-Pacific region beyond being a by-product of the US alliance system.

The paper concludes that the bilateral partnership has exceeded the limits that would be seen if it were merely cooperation between two spokes in the US alliance mechanism. The burgeoning areas of bilateral cooperation indicate that the Australia-Japan relationship provides value in its own right, while complementing each nation’s formal alliance with the US.

Development of the Australia-Japan security relationship

The security relationship between former wartime enemies, Australia and Japan, has been painstakingly regenerated over the past 70 years. The post-war relationship initially centred on economic interests, with commercially-focused treaties signed in 1957 and 1976. Defence and security aspects did not evolve a similar closeness during that period.⁵

In terms of tangible security cooperation, the Cold War spawned only a limited exchange of intelligence information between the countries and dialogue between academics and policy planners on regional cooperation mechanisms.⁶ The 1990s saw increasing, though still modest, defence cooperation. The Japanese Self-Defense Force (JSDF) participated in the 1992-93 Cambodian peacekeeping mission, under the command of an ADF officer, and again joined peacekeeping efforts under ADF command in East Timor between 2002 and 2003.⁷

The strength of the bilateral security relationship accelerated during the 2000s, due to shared interests and vision. The core basis for the renewed relationship, as described during Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi’s 2002 Australian visit, is ‘shared values of democracy, freedom, the rule of law and market-based economies’.⁸ Subsequent statements by senior politicians from both countries continue to emphasise those shared values and security interests.

The ADF's provision of security to a JSDF force in Iraq, which enabled the JSDF deployment between 2004 and 2006, was likely the catalyst for further strengthening of the security relationship. In 2007, the two countries signed a Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation, the first bilateral security agreement between Japan and a country other than the US.⁹ The agreement provides a foundation for broad cooperation on security issues between the two nations, and for regular policy discussions between respective foreign and defence ministers.¹⁰

Importantly, the relationship is considered an 'action shop' rather than a 'talk shop', the latter being a deficiency that characterises many Asia-Pacific security fora. Practical outcomes include an Information Security Agreement and an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement, two important bilateral agreements that provide a framework to improve interoperability between national security and defence forces.¹¹ The relationship was further elevated to a 'Special Strategic Partnership' in 2014, with cyber security cooperation being added as an important dialogue discussion.¹²

Bipartisan support for the deepening security relationship is an important factor in its growth. Despite several changes of ruling party or prime minister in each country between 2007 and 2014, the two Governments have maintained a strong commitment to the high-level security relationship.¹³ The relationship in 2015 is extremely strong, demonstrated by a recent defence technology treaty and discussion of potential Australian acquisition of a Japanese submarine, with strong personal ties between national leaders.¹⁴

Australia's engagement with Japan explicitly supports Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's agenda of revising Japan's defence posture and increasing involvement in regional security issues, even at some risk of upsetting China.¹⁵ However, despite media speculation of the relationship being potentially upgraded from a 'quasi alliance' to a formal alliance, such a move is extremely unlikely to be supported in either Australia, where the perceived risk of alienating China is highlighted, or Japan, where the constitutional limitation on its defence posture maintains popular support.¹⁶

Australian and Japanese relationships within the US alliance

At the core of Asia-Pacific security relationships since the 1950s is the US 'hub-and-spokes' approach of mainly bilateral alliances between it and regional countries such as Japan and Australia.¹⁷ Until the 1990s, national security links between Australia and Japan were primarily indirect, through the US. Japan and Australia have been described as the 'northern and southern anchors' of the US alliance system in the Asia-Pacific, with Purnendra Jain believing that the bilateral linkages have grown due to the countries being 'spokes' connected to a common 'hub', when politico-strategic factors have provided sufficient impetus.¹⁸

Arguably, the ADF's support to the JSDF deployment to Iraq was primarily useful in facilitating Japan's demonstration of commitment to its US alliance. Japan certainly sees its bilateral military alliance with the US as the basis of Japan's security, and Japanese Governments tend to strengthen their security through the US, not outside it.¹⁹ With the perceived security implications from the growth of Chinese military capability, however, the US has applied pressure to Japan to soften its constitutional limitation on the use of its military forces, and to expand its strategic approach to regional security.²⁰

Additionally, Malcolm Cook and Thomas Wilkins contend that the relative decline of the US and Japan has caused the latter to seek new partnerships within the region, with US blessing for the increased coordination between its alliance 'spokes',²¹ described by Euan Graham as 'Alliance "cross-bracing"'.²² The US has also adjusted its approach, developing formal trilateral cooperation with Japan and Australia, through the Trilateral Security Dialogue that commenced in 2002.²³ Considering this context, it is certainly arguable that the Australian-Japan bilateral security partnership has advanced because of, and through, the US alliance. As Desmond Ball points out:

[I]t is difficult ... even impossible to distinguish bilateral activities from the myriad of multilateral activities in which Australia and Japan are engaged, and particularly from

collaborative activities undertaken as part of the respective alliance arrangements with the United States.²⁴

Despite the impressive list of exercises that the ADF has undertaken with the JSDF in recent years, there has been significant impediment to undertaking purely bilateral exercises, and joint exercise activity has often been nested within a US-Japan exercise framework.²⁵ Ryo Sahashi's analysis of why the Japan-Australia relationship is likely to expand is telling—three of the four reasons involve the US. These include both countries, as US allies, seeing a US regional presence as in their national interest; Japanese leaders recognising that Australia is important for US power projection in the region; and Japan benefiting bilaterally and trilaterally from US-Australian security ties.²⁶

In considering the possibility of the relationship becoming a formal alliance, Hauke Kleavinghaus believes that a formal treaty would be unnecessary because of the obligations of existing treaties, and natural cooperation on security issues.²⁷ Graham considers that the 'bilateral Australia-Japan relationship is destined to remain the short side of an isosceles triangle formed by US-Japan-Australia relationship'.²⁸ Such views support the premise that Japan-Australia cooperation is a by-product of the countries' respective alliances with the US.

The Australia-Japan bilateral relationship in Indo-Asia-Pacific security

The bilateral relationship is becoming strategically important in regional security. Rod Lyon notes that historically, 'close, bilateral or trilateral defence cooperation between Asian countries has been rare'.²⁹ Therefore, the deepening Australia-Japan security relationship does seem to fit the 'special relationship' description that is ascribed to it by politicians from both countries.³⁰ Rikki Kersten and William Tow consider that this represents a common strategic choice—with multilateral security arrangements becoming more important for regional stability—as an adjunct to respective bilateral relationships with the US.³¹

Ryo Sahashi supports this perspective, arguing that the US is a necessary but no longer sufficient security partner, and that security partnerships, such as with Australia, are a necessary strategic tool.³² Yusuke Ishihara contends that the current bilateral developments represent a second evolution of the security partnership, with new and increased areas of cooperation. These include the proposed new collective security posture for the JSDF, which could lead to interwoven logistics support and force protection operations between the two nations' forces. He also points to the possibility of Australia's future submarine project allowing Japan's defence industry an unprecedented international commercial opportunity.³³

Graeme Dobell similarly argues that 'defence cooperation is a function of capability', such that forces of both nations operating F-35s—and potentially the same submarines in future—will drive the relationship closer. He notes that in a short 20 years, Japan has risen to the second tier of security partnerships, alongside Australia's traditional allies of New Zealand and the UK.³⁴ In return, Japan's 2014 Defence White Paper identifies Australia as a 'first-ranked security cooperation partner'.³⁵

At the core of the bilateral relationship is a focus on 'an open, rules-based regional order, based on the two countries' common US alliances'.³⁶ Cook and Wilkins discern Japan's new grand strategy as one in which its increased security challenges and comparatively-reduced capabilities prescribe the need to go beyond sole reliance on the US security alliance. In fact, the most recent Defence White Papers from each nation identify maritime security in the Asia-Pacific as a primary concern for the security of the respective nations, and the region.

Japan is seeking to invest in greater regional cooperation, partly through multilateral fora and partly through enhanced bilateral strategic partnerships, of which Australia is one—but arguably the first and most prominent.³⁷ Andrew Davies similarly argues that new geostrategic drivers in the Indo-Asia-Pacific—including globalisation, military modernisation and the rising cost of military systems—have provided compelling cause for increased cooperation.³⁸ These views infer that the existing common point of a US alliance relationship may have initiated the growth

of the Australia-Japan security relationship,³⁹ but that sufficient geostrategic factors now exist for it to sustain itself.

Arguably, Australia and Japan have as much or more in common with respect to their national interests as they do with the US. Graham notes that the 'primacy of the US security relationship for Australia and Japan ... can ... overshadow the direct maritime economic linkages that continue to bind' the two countries.⁴⁰ This reinforces the perspective that successive governments of both nations have welcomed the US rebalance towards the Asia-Pacific because of their own national interests,⁴¹ and not simply as followers of a revised US grand strategy.⁴²

Graham notes that of Australia's major maritime trading partners, eight are in the Asia-Pacific, with Japan the largest export market, and second largest partner for imports.⁴³ He further categorises the strategic importance of trade commodities, with a significant share of Japan's energy, mineral and food imports being sourced from Australia. Graham contends that this accordingly drives a shared national interest in the protection of sea lines of communication, and freedom of navigation in maritime and air domains.⁴⁴ Such shared interests reinforce the likelihood that the bilateral relationship exists in symbiosis with the US alliance paradigm.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the Australia-Japan security relationship has substantially expanded since the end of the Cold War. There is a strong track record of practical defence cooperation since 1992, and increasing institutionalisation of the bilateral security partnership. However, there has also been a parallel increase in the trilateral defence relationship with the US. It is reasonable to consider that the US did play a significant role in encouraging greater Australia-Japan security ties as part of the US grand view of Indo-Asia-Pacific security.

Certainly, changing geostrategic factors in the Indo-Asia Pacific, including the new US approach to the region brought about by the rise of China as an economic and military power, have been an influence on the growth of the Australia-Japan relationship. However, the same changing geostrategic factors appear to have influenced the policies of both the Australian and Japanese Governments, such that an improved bilateral relationship has become important for each country's perception of its security, amongst the growth of multilateral and other bilateral security relationships within the region.

With the two nations having an increasingly-convergent understanding of regional security factors, it is reasonable to argue that the bilateral partnership has exceeded the limits that would be seen if it were merely cooperation between two spokes in the US alliance mechanism. The burgeoning areas of bilateral cooperation support a view that the Australia-Japan relationship provides value in its own right, while complementing each nation's formal alliance with the US.

Notes

- 1 Malcolm Cook and Thomas Wilkins, *The Quiet Achiever: Australia-Japan security relations*, Lowy Institute for International Policy: Sydney, January 2011, p. 1.
- 2 Yusuke Ishihara, 'Japan-Australia Defence Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific Region', in William Tow and Tomonori Yoshizaki (eds.), *Beyond the Hub and Spokes: Australia-Japan security cooperation*, National Institute for Defense Studies: Tokyo, 2014, p. 93.
- 3 Yusuke Ishihara, 'The Case for Japan-Australia Defence Co-operation Guidelines', *The Strategist* [website], 6 May 2015, available at <<http://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-case-for-japan-australia-defence-cooperation-guidelines/>> accessed 19 October 2015.
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- 5 Cook and Wilkins, *The Quiet Achiever*, p. 4.
- 6 Yusuke Ishihara, *Japan-Australia Security Relations and the Rise of China: pursuing the 'bilateral-plus' approaches*, UNISCI Discussion Papers, No. 32, National Institute for Defense Studies: Tokyo, May 2013, p. 84.
- 7 Desmond Ball, *Whither the Japan-Australia Security Relationship?*, Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainability: Berkeley, 21 September 2006, pp. 2 and 9-10.
- 8 Hauke Klevinghaus, *The Samurai Preparing for the Dragon's Attack? Normative Drivers and Strategic Foundations of Japan's Security Cooperation with Australia and the United States*, Anchor Academic Publishing: Hamburg, 2013, p. 31.
- 9 Ishihara, *Japan-Australia Security Relations and the Rise of China*, pp. 82-4.
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- 14 Nick Bisley, 'Why Japan has a big Stake in the Fate of Tony Abbott's Leadership', *The Conversation* [website], 10 February 2015, available at <<http://theconversation.com/why-japan-has-a-big-stake-in-the-fate-of-tony-abbotts-leadership-37358>> accessed 19 October 2015.
- 15 Nick Bisley, 'Japan and Australia Join Forces in Asia's Brave New World', *The Conversation* [website], 7 July 2014, available at <<http://theconversation.com/japan-and-australia-join-forces-in-asias-brave-new-world-28726>> accessed 19 October 2015.
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- 17 Searle and Kamae, 'Anchoring Trilateralism', p. 465. It should be noted that the Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty, known as ANZUS, is a trilateral treaty, although it has been effectively a bilateral treaty since New Zealand's suspension in the 1980s.
- 18 Jain, 'Japan-Australia Security Ties and the United States', pp. 521-5.
- 19 Cook and Wilkins, *The Quiet Achiever*, p. 5.
- 20 Craig Mark, 'Transformations in Security Relations Between the USA, Japan and Australia', *Global Science Technology and Science Forum Journal of Law and Social Sciences*, Vol. 2, No. 1, December 2012, pp. 60-1.
- 21 Cook and Wilkins, *The Quiet Achiever*, p. 7.
- 22 Euan Graham, 'Maritime Security and Capacity-Building', in Tow and Yoshizaki, *Beyond the Hub and Spokes*, p. 46.

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- 23 Berkshire Miller, 'US-Japan-Australia: a trilateral with purpose?', *The Diplomat* [website], 25 October 2013, available at <<http://thediplomat.com/2013/10/u-s-japan-australia-a-trilateral-with-purpose/>> accessed 19 October 2015.
- 24 Ball, *Whither the Japan-Australia Security Relationship?*, p. 3.
- 25 The author was Director Plans and Operations at Headquarters Air Command in 2011-12, responsible for Air Force exercise planning. Despite Chief of Air Force's support for bilateral exercises, it was only possible to arrange exercises in a trilateral (or US-run multilateral) construct due to Japanese requirements. This is further exemplified in the list of exercises cited as evidence of military cooperation in Ishihara, 'Japan-Australia Defence Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific Region', pp. 98-100.
- 26 Ryo Sahashi, *Security Partnerships in Japan's Asia Strategy: creating order, building capacity and sharing burden*, Center for Asian Studies: Kanagawa, 2013, pp. 13-4.
- 27 Kleivinghaus, *The Samurai Preparing for the Dragon's Attack*, p. 39.
- 28 Graham, 'Maritime Security and Capacity-Building', p. 56.
- 29 Rod Lyon, 'Australia, Japan and the Future of Strategic Relationships in Asia', *The Strategist* [website], 10 July 2014, available at <<http://www.aspistrategist.org.au/australia-japan-and-the-future-of-strategic-relationships-in-asia/>> accessed 19 October 2015.
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- 33 Ishihara, 'The Case for Japan-Australia Defence Co-operation Guidelines'.
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- 37 Cook and Wilkins, 'Aligned Allies'.
- 38 Andrew Davies, 'Future Japan-Australia Pathways to Defence Collaboration: the Australian perspective', in Tow and Yoshizaki, *Beyond the Hub and Spokes*, pp. 82-3.
- 39 Tadashi Anno, 'Japanese Domestic Politics and Security Cooperation with Australia: the limits of "normalisation"', in William Tow and Rikki Kersten (eds.), *Bilateral Perspectives on Regional Security: Australia, Japan and the Asia-Pacific*, Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, August 2012, pp. 46-54.
- 40 Graham, 'Maritime Security and Capacity-Building', p. 45.
- 41 Cook and Wilkins, 'Aligned Allies'.
- 42 Searle and Kamae, 'Anchoring Trilateralism', p. 468.
- 43 Graham, 'Maritime Security and Capacity-Building', pp. 45-6.
- 44 Graham, 'Maritime Security and Capacity-Building', pp. 45-6.