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The Australia-Japan Defence Relationship: improving interoperability at the operational level

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Abstract

This paper analyses ways to deepen the Australia-Japan defence relationship. It argues that while there has been considerable progress in the last decade, the operational level is the missing aspect of the defence relationship, and that there is still much work to be done to achieve interoperability between the ADF and the Japanese Self-Defence Force.

The paper contends that the key to bridging the apparent strategic-tactical divide is not only to focus on the operational level but also to build capacity in operational planning through developing a thorough understanding of each other's planning doctrines, operational and intelligence capabilities and limitations, and rules of engagement. The paper concludes that this is best addressed through more involvement by Japan in Australian operations and exercises, notably Operation RENDER SAFE and Exercises PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP and TALISMAN SABRE.

The Australia-Japan Defence Relationship: improving interoperability at the operational level

Introduction

Australia and Japan are in many respects natural security partners: they are both Asia-Pacific powers, liberal democracies, desire a rules-based international order, and are close allies of the US. Over the last decade, the defence relationship between both nations has both broadened and deepened significantly.¹

Most notably, on 9 October 2013, then Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott stated that '[a]s far as I'm concerned, Japan is Australia's best friend in Asia and we want to keep it a very strong friendship'.² Later, he described Japan as a 'strong ally'.³ While Japan is not legally an 'ally', the reality is that the Prime Minister's sentiment was more important than his word choice—and the sentiment is that Japan is a very close security partner, and getting closer.

The 2013 Australian Defence White Paper states that '[t]here is close policy dialogue [between Australia and Japan] ... facilitating exchanges on strategic perceptions and policy approaches, and setting priorities for practical cooperation'.⁴ Additionally, Japan's 2014 Defence White Paper states that 'Japan will further deepen its relationship with Australia ... [and] will also actively conduct joint training and other activities so as to improve interoperability with Australia'.⁵ However, while it is clear that the relationship has come a very long way in the last decade, there is still much work to be done in order to achieve interoperability between the ADF and the Japanese Self-Defence Force (JSDF).

The aim of this paper is to analyse ways to deepen the Australia-Japan defence relationship at the operational level. To do this, it will first review the achievements of the Australia-Japan defence relationship to date; second, discuss the operational level and why it is important; and third, examine three exercises/operations that are of low to medium sensitivity and complexity that could be used as platforms to enhance interoperability between the ADF and the JSDF. The paper will conclude that the operational level is the missing aspect of the Australia-Japan defence relationship and that it is best addressed by building capacity in operational planning through more involvement by Japan in Australia's robust exercise program.

The status of the Australia-Japan defence relationship

Before ways to deepen the relationship can be discussed, a brief summary of what has already transpired is required. In March 2007, the prime ministers of both nations signed the Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation.⁶ In December 2008, a Memorandum on Defence Cooperation was signed at defence minister level, which 'recognises the gradual maturation of the defence relationship from one based on dialogue to one based on practical cooperation'.⁷

These agreements were followed in May 2010 by an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement, which came into effect in January 2013, and in May 2012 by an Information Security Agreement, which came into effect in March 2013.⁸ The Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement is an important enabling document that applies only to low-level activities such as exercises, peacekeeping operations and humanitarian assistance and disaster-relief operations, but not conventional military operations.⁹ The Information Security Agreement was significant because, without it to protect each other's classified information, the defence relationship would be unable to deepen as required by the respective leaders.¹⁰

Since the Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation in 2007, there has also been a large number of meetings across various levels. While these have mostly been at the bilateral level, there has also been a number at the trilateral level, including US representatives.¹¹ Notably, the majority of these interactions have been at the strategic level, which is 'concerned with the art and science of employing national power in a synchronised fashion to achieve the national end state and national objectives'.¹²

Both before and after the Joint Declaration, Australian and Japanese forces had deployed on peacekeeping operations in Cambodia in 1992 and in Timor-Leste in 2000, and are currently deployed in South Sudan.

They also deployed on humanitarian assistance and disaster-relief operations in December 2004 in response to the Indian Ocean tsunami, and in March 2011 following a substantial earthquake in Japan. They were also involved in humanitarian reconstruction in Iraq during 2005-06.¹³ All of these deployed activities occurred at the tactical level of war where ‘tasks are planned and conducted to achieve operational objectives’.¹⁴

Where to next?

It is apparent from the above developments that the defence relationship has been focused on either establishing the relationship’s strategic framework or actually undertaking deployed tactical-level activities as events dictate. What is missing is a deeper relationship at the operational level, where ‘campaigns and operations are planned, synchronised and conducted to achieve strategic objectives’.¹⁵ Addressing this deficiency is necessary in order to improve interoperability between Australia and Japan.

ADF doctrine also notes that the operational level is the responsibility of commanders who employ the operational art, which is ‘the skilful employment of military forces to attain strategic goals through the design, organisation, sequencing and direction of campaigns and major operations’.¹⁶ Of note, ‘[o]perational art translates strategic into operational and ultimately tactical actions’.¹⁷ Therefore, the operational level is critical to deepening the Australia-Japan defence relationship and further developing ADF-JSDF interoperability.

On 1 July 2014, the Japanese Government officially reinterpreted Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution (which renounces war) and allowed the JSDF to conduct collective self-defence of countries that have a ‘close relationship with Japan’.¹⁸ The Upper House approved this in September 2015 and the reinterpretation is now law. This is a very important development because, for the first time, the JSDF will be able to operate in limited combat roles alongside the militaries of other nations in the defence of Japan.¹⁹

This is one of Japan’s first steps towards becoming a ‘normal country’—able to use its military power like other states.²⁰ In the future, further normalisation may see the JSDF conducting a broader array of activities across the spectrum of conflict away from Japan, and potentially in coalition with Australia. Hence the time is right to increase interoperability at the operational level between Australia and Japan.

Enhancing interoperability through exercises and operations

To describe areas for future Australia-Japan collaboration, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) has developed a categorisation system, based on the sensitivity and complexity of activities.²¹ It uses a simple rating scale of low, medium and high, where low-sensitivity/complexity activities might include peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, counter-terrorism and counter-piracy operations and exercises.²² Medium-sensitivity/complexity activities could include higher-end military exercises, as well as capability development on submarines and ballistic-missile defence.²³ High-sensitivity/complexity activities could include intelligence collection, cyber, and a response to the US anti-access and area-denial concept.²⁴

For the purposes of discussion, this paper will focus on exercises and operations at the low to medium levels of sensitivity and complexity. Peacekeeping and humanitarian aid/disaster-relief activities are considered low-sensitivity/complexity activities, as there is already a significant ‘history of cooperation’ between the two countries.²⁵

While the ‘primary justification for dispatching defence forces to help another country experiencing a disaster [or instability] is usually humanitarian ... [and related to] saving lives, alleviating suffering and maintaining human dignity’, there are also less altruistic reasons.²⁶ These include ‘reinforcing alliances and partnerships, advancing foreign policy agendas and providing knowledge of operational military capabilities’.²⁷ While the latter reasons do not trump the former, they are nevertheless very important—and require clear-headed thinking on how best to accomplish them.

Planning and practice is accordingly required to work through complex issues and develop tactical and operational-level proficiency. This is best done through exercises, either in the field or at a headquarters,

as they 'are the most effective way of demonstrating and evaluating ... preparedness for operations'.²⁸ Furthermore, ADF doctrine states that exercises 'are an important tool through which the ADF tests and validates its concepts, procedures, systems and tactics.... [and they also] demonstrate readiness, build interoperability and contribute to force development'.²⁹

While most peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance/disaster-relief operations are undertaken with little warning, the performance of the deployed force increases considerably if they are practised in the sorts of activities they are deployed to perform. It obviously also helps if the participating forces have good levels of interoperability. Because Australia and Japan have jointly experienced many years of tactical operations and exercises—and with strategic-level agreements now in place—there is scope to expand the bilateral peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance/disaster-relief relationship to a more permanent footing.

One way to achieve this would be through the ADF's Program of Major Service Activities, which is 'a rolling program of joint and combined collective training exercises and activities that are planned to meet' the ADF's operational preparedness requirements.³⁰ Within that program, there are three exercises/operations that would seem well suited to increase interoperability and operational-planning skills at the low- to medium-level of sensitivity and complexity, namely Operation RENDER SAFE, Exercise PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP and Exercise TALISMAN SABRE.

Operation RENDER SAFE is the ADF's annual series of operations that aims to safely dispose of World War 2-vintage explosive remnants of war in a number of South Pacific island nations.³¹ While the operation has previously involved other nations, it has not yet involved Japan.³² Because the activity is an operation, it involves significant operational-level planning, which includes amphibious, aviation, medical, intelligence, and public affairs aspects. It is relevant to both peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance/disaster-relief operations, would increase ADF-JSDF interoperability, and falls within the strategic framework of agreements such as the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement.

Exercise PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP is another key peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance/disaster-relief related activity that is also low sensitivity and complexity. It is a US Pacific Command-sponsored activity that involves many nations from across the Pacific, with Australia being a leading participant. It 'aims to strengthen international relationships, improve host nation resilience to natural disasters and improve the interoperability of regional forces in response to natural disaster and humanitarian emergencies'.³³ While Japan has participated previously, it has not done so consistently. Like RENDER SAFE, Exercise PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP involves a range of military capabilities in a humanitarian assistance/disaster relief-like environment and would also sit comfortably within the framework of Australia-Japan defence agreements.³⁴

Exercise TALISMAN SABRE is in a different league as it is 'designed to train ... military forces in planning and conducting Combined Task Force operations to improve the combat readiness and interoperability' of the forces involved.³⁵ As it is also focused on mid-intensity 'high-end' warfighting, it is of medium-level sensitivity and complexity.³⁶ In 2015, the exercise was held in Australia and 40 JSDF ground troops participated for the first time, albeit operating only with US forces, and not the ADF.³⁷ Additionally, because of its combined task force focus, TALISMAN SABRE would provide the most operational level benefit to the Australia-Japan defence relationship, as the JSDF would be able to learn from experienced US and ADF operational level headquarters.

Exercises and low-level operations such as those described above would serve to achieve many strategic-level objectives in the Japan-Australia relationship, such as supporting foreign policy aims and applying military capabilities to soft-power objectives. They would also serve to tighten the military-to-military relationship and instil trust and understanding.

These issues are not only important at the tactical level, where force elements work with each other, but also at the operational level where the activities are planned, synchronised and deconflicted. This is important because this is where national operational-level planning doctrines are employed and where the often difficult issues about what can and cannot be done are explored, such as capabilities, limitations, and rules of engagement, as well as operational intelligence exchanges.³⁸

While RENDER SAFE and PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP are both low sensitivity and complexity, they offer excellent opportunities to deepen the operational-level planning relationship, with little risk and in real-world humanitarian assistance/disaster-relief settings. They are potentially an excellent example of 'learning to walk before you run'. TALISMAN SABRE, however, is the best longer-term opportunity to fully function at the operational level, both before and during the exercise, across several areas of operation, within a complex scenario and in a fully joint and combined setting.

Conclusion

This paper has proposed several ways in which the Australia-Japan defence relationship can be deepened without undue sensitivity and complexity. The importance of this requirement has significantly increased since 1 July 2014, with the Japanese Government's reinterpretation of Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution and subsequent permission for the JSDF to provide collective self-defence of other countries' forces operating with the JSDF, thus allowing for 'a more normal defence posture'.³⁹

The paper has also contended that the key to bridging the apparent strategic-tactical divide is not only to focus on the operational level but also to build capacity in operational planning through developing a thorough understanding of each other's planning doctrines, operational and intelligence capabilities and limitations, and rules of engagement. It has argued that Japan's involvement in activities such as RENDER SAFE, PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP and TALISMAN SABRE would achieve this.

The Australia-Japan defence relationship has developed quickly and in the last decade there has been an exceptional level of cooperation and collaboration in deepening the defence ties between the two countries. As noted by Yusuke Ishihara, '[i]n light of such a strong record of bilateral cooperation, it is not too much to state that the Japan-Australia bilateral relationship is an "action shop", unlike many other collaborative frameworks which are often only "talk shops"'.⁴⁰ While much work has been done, it is now time to deepen the relationship at the operational level.

Notes

¹ 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. 92.

² Amy King, 'Australia and Northeast Asia', in Peter Dean, Stephan Frühling and Brendan Taylor (eds.), *Australia's Defence: towards a new era?*, Melbourne University Publishing: Melbourne, 2014, p. 97.

- 3 Robert Ayson, 'Australia-Japan: Abbott uses the 'A' word', *The Interpreter* [website], 3 December 2013, available at <<http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2013/12/03/Australia-Japan-Abbott-uses-the-A-word.aspx?COLLCC=321711321&>> accessed 24 June 2015.
- 4 Department of Defence, *Defence White Paper 2013*, Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra, 2013, p. 61.
- 5 Japan Ministry of Defense, *Defense of Japan 2014*, Ministry of Defense: Tokyo, 2014, p. 390, available at <http://www.mod.go.jp/e/publ/w_paper/2014.html> accessed 10 June 2015.
- 6 Ishihara, 'Japan-Australia Defence Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific Region', p. 92.
- 7 Japan Ministry of Defense, 'Memorandum on Defence Cooperation between Ministry of Defense, Japan and Department of Defence, Australia', *Ministry of Defense* [website], 18 December 2008, available at <http://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/exchange/nikoku/pacific/australia/pdf/memorandum_e.pdf> accessed 13 June 2015: also Department of Defence, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030, (Defence White Paper)*, Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra, May 2009, p. 95, which states that '[k]ey elements [of the Memorandum on Defence Cooperation] include an expression of intent to further cooperation in counter-terrorism, disaster relief, humanitarian assistance, peacekeeping and maritime security; a commitment to explore cooperation in science and technology; a commitment to develop an annual calendar of defence activities; an emphasis on multilateral and trilateral defence cooperation with the United States; and a formal commitment to regular bilateral Defence Ministers' meetings'.
- 8 Yusuke Ishihara, 'Japan-Australia Security Relations and the Rise of China: pursuing the "bilateral-plus" approaches', UNISCI Discussion Paper No 32, Research Unit on International Security and Cooperation, Madrid, May 2013, p. 85, available at <<http://revistas.ucm.es/index.php/UNIS/article/viewFile/44791/42210>> accessed 13 June 2015.
- 9 Ishihara, 'Japan-Australia Defence Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific Region', p. 101. Notably, the US-Japan Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement also applies to combat operations in and around Japan.
- 10 Malcolm Cook and Thomas Wilkins, *The Quite Achiever: Australia-Japan security relations*, The Lowy Institute for International Policy: Sydney, January 2011, p. 11; and Ishihara, 'Japan-Australia Defence Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific Region', p. 102.
- 11 Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Strong and Secure: a strategy for Australia's national security (National Security Strategy)*, Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra, 2013, p. 22, states that the relationship will be based 'on shared strategic and regional security interests including through the Australia-Japan-United States Trilateral Strategic Dialogue'.
- 12 Australian Defence Force (ADF), *Australian Defence Doctrine Publication 5.0 – Joint Planning*, Edition 2, Defence Publishing Service: Canberra, 20 February 2014, p. 1-3, available at <http://www.defence.gov.au/adfwc/Documents/DoctrineLibrary/ADDP/ADDP_5_0.pdf> accessed 7 June 2015.
- 13 Ishihara, 'Japan-Australia Defence Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific Region', p. 96.
- 14 ADF, *Australian Defence Doctrine Publication 5.0 – Joint Planning*, p. 1-3.
- 15 ADF, *Australian Defence Doctrine Publication 5.0 – Joint Planning*, p. 1-3.
- 16 ADF, *Australian Defence Doctrine Publication 5.0 – Joint Planning*, p. 2-2.
- 17 ADF, *Australian Defence Doctrine Publication 5.0 – Joint Planning*, p. 1-3.
- 18 Japan Ministry of Defense, *Defense of Japan 2014*, p. 120; and Lisa Sharland, 'Reinterpreting Article 9: enhancing Japan's engagement in UN peacekeeping', *The Strategist* [website], 10 July 2014, available at <<http://www.aspistrategist.org.au/reinterpreting-article-9-enhancing-japans-engagement-in-un-peacekeeping/>> accessed 11 June 2015. The new bills were passed by the Lower House in July 2015 and the Upper House in September 2015.
- 19 Japan Ministry of Defense, *Defense of Japan 2014*, p. 120, states that '[n]evertheless, the Government interprets that the Constitution does not permit armed troops to be dispatched to the land, sea, or airspace of other countries with the aim of using force; such overseas deployment of troops would exceed the definition of the minimum necessary level of self-defense'.
- 20 Graeme Dobell, 'China as Number One, Japan as Normal', *The Strategist* [website], 22 December 2014, available at <<http://www.aspistrategist.org.au/china-as-number-one-japan-as-normal/>> accessed 11 June 2015.
- 21 See Hayley Channer, Andrew Davies and Peter Jennings, *Something New Under the Rising Sun: expanding Australia-Japan defence cooperation*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI): Canberra, June 2013, pp. 5-6;

and, Andrew Davies, 'Future Japan-Australia Pathways to Defence Collaboration: the Australian perspective', in Tow and Yoshizaki, *Beyond the Hub and Spokes*, p. 81.

22 Davies, 'Future Japan-Australia Pathways to Defence Collaboration', p. 81.

23 Davies, 'Future Japan-Australia Pathways to Defence Collaboration', p. 81.

24 Davies, 'Future Japan-Australia Pathways to Defence Collaboration', p. 81. This concept was first called 'AirSea Battle'; in January 2015, it was re-titled the 'Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons'.

25 See Channer, Davies and Jennings, *Something New Under the Rising Sun*, p. 5.

26 Athol Yates and Anthony Bergin, *More than Good Deeds: disaster risk management and Australian, Japanese and US defence forces*, ASPI: Canberra, December 2011, p. 1.

27 Yates and Bergin, *More than Good Deeds*, p. 1.

28 ADF, *Australian Defence Doctrine Publication 7.0.3 – Exercise Planning and Conduct*, Defence Publishing Service: Canberra, 15 June 2010, p. 1-1, available at http://www.defence.gov.au/ADFWC/Documents/DoctrineLibrary/ADFP/ADFP_7-0-2_The_Defence_Training_Model.pdf accessed 7 June 2015.

29 ADF, *Australian Defence Doctrine Publication 7.0.3 – Exercise Planning and Conduct*, p. 1-2.

30 ADF, *Australian Defence Doctrine Publication 7.0 – Training*, Defence Publishing Service: Canberra, 19 September 2011, p. 3-6, available at <http://www.defence.gov.au/ADFWC/Documents/DoctrineLibrary/ADDP/ADDP7.0-Training.pdf> accessed 7 June 2015.

31 Department of Defence, 'Global Operations - South West Pacific Nations - Operation RENDER SAFE', available at <http://www.defence.gov.au/operations/SouthWestPacificNations/> accessed 16 June 2015.

32 By the inclusion of Japan, the activity would include the main warring parties from World War Two in the Southwest Pacific area and allow Japan to assist in the peaceful re-development of the region by cleaning up unexploded ordnance, much of which is Japanese.

33 Department of Defence, 'Exercises - Pacific Partnership 2014', available at <http://www.defence.gov.au/exercises/pacificpartnership14/> accessed 16 June 2015; and Sam Bateman, Anthony Bergin and Hayley Channer, *Terms of Engagement: Australia's regional defence diplomacy*, ASPI: Canberra, July 2013, p. 47.

34 These activities are also opportunities not only for detailed planning to occur at the operational level but are also excellent ways for Japan to increase its military engagement with the broader region, alongside Australia, with the added advantage of developing higher-end military capabilities in low-risk settings. One example is the use of Australia's new amphibious Landing Helicopter Dock ships, with their significant personnel and vehicle accommodation, aviation, medical, and command, control and communications facilities.

35 Department of Defence, 'Exercises – Talisman Saber', available at <http://www.defence.gov.au/exercises/ts13/> accessed 16 June 2015.

36 Department of Defence, 'Exercises – Talisman Saber'.

37 Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC), 'South China Sea dispute: Japan to participate in Australia-US Talisman Sabre military drill for first time', *ABC News* [website], 26 May 2015, available at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-05-26/japan-to-join-major-australia-us-military-training-drill/6498432> accessed 16 June 2015. Additionally, TALISMAN SABRE will become increasingly useful for the amphibious warfare opportunities it will present to both Australia and Japan as they develop their separate amphibious capabilities.

38 This could include operational intelligence exchanges in such areas as joint intelligence preparation of the operating environment, threat and capability analysis, counterintelligence, targeting and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance planning. Additionally, the development of high-end secure information and communications technology systems to support operational planning and intelligence activities is required to make the relationship live beyond exercises, and enable combined crisis planning between operational-level headquarters in their respective homelands.

39 King, 'Australia and Northeast Asia', p. 98.

40 Ishihara, 'Japan-Australia Defence Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific Region', p. 97.