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Anchors and Antidotes: The Japan-Australia Strategic Partnership

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Over the last decade, the Japan-Australia security relationship has deepened and broadened more than any other in the Asia-Pacific region. The self-professed “northern and southern anchors” of the US alliance system in the Western Pacific are now joined at the crown. At the beginning of this millennium, it was hard for the Australian Ambassador to get access beyond the relevant desk officer at the Japanese Defense Agency. Today, there are “2+2” Foreign and Defense Minister’s meetings annually and bilateral exercises are a regular event. In addition, Australia and Japan are involved in serious discussions regarding the sale of Japan’s world’s best conventional submarine technology to Australia, and on Japanese Air Self-Defense Force training exercises in Australia’s Northern Territory.

2 Anchors

This burgeoning strategic partnership is anchored by Japan and Australia’s respective alliances with the United States, and the central role the alliance plays in each country’s foreign and security policy (making them, to use Victor Cha’s term, ‘quasi-allies’). The same shared status quo-oriented concerns that are accelerating the broadening of the US-Japan and US-Australia alliances are strengthening direct Japan-Australia security ties from a very low baseline ten years ago.

As noted by many senior officials in Canberra and Tokyo, their respective alliance relationships with the United States provided each with the necessary level of strategic trust to develop a bilateral security relationship that is now second in depth and scope to their alliance relationships with the United States. The 2007 Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation that provides the framework for the ongoing deepening of security ties affirms,

“the common strategic interests and security benefits embodied in their respective alliance relationships with the United States, and committing to strengthening trilateral cooperation, including through practical collaboration among the foreign affairs, defence and other related agencies of all three countries, as well as through the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue and recognising that strengthened bilateral cooperation will be conducive to the enhancement of trilateral cooperation.”

Reflecting this affirmation in operational terms, the first ever bilateral air force exercise between Japan and Australia in 2011 was held on the sidelines of the US-led multilateral Red Flag exercises. In 2015, Japan is expected to participate for the first time in the biennial US-Australian Talisman Sabre exercise which will reportedly focus on “storming enemy beaches.” Any eventual purchase by Australia of Japanese submarines or submarine technology will also have a powerful trilateral dimension as these submarines would be armed with US weapons systems.

The strengthening Japan-Australia security partnership also is a key regional anchor for the US “rebalance”. The decisions by Japan and Australia to strengthen their alliances with the US and to place their bilateral security partnership primarily under their trilateral relationship (through the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue) is a strong sign of support for

Malcolm Cook, senior fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, and **Thomas Wilkins**, senior lecturer at the University of Sydney, explain that “The rapid development of the Japan-Australia security partnership over the last decade and into the future is anchored in their respective alliance relationships with the United States and support for US regional leadership.”

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continued US strategic primacy in the region. Australia’s 2011 agreement for the rotation of US marines through Darwin and greater US access to the Stirling naval base in Western Australia are part of Canberra’s willingness to assume a larger burden in order to support this primacy. This greater US presence in Australia already is enhancing the scope and frequency of trilateral exercises there. This trend will likely continue with Japan’s limited relaxation of its ban on the exercise of the right of self-defense and on arms exports, and the upcoming revisions of the US-Japan alliance guidelines. These reflect Prime Minister Abe’s commitment to a “fairer” alliance relationship in which Japan plays a more active regional role.

Ballistic missile defense may be the best and most important example of this allied anchor for US forward defense interests in the Western Pacific. Japan has committed to increasing its Aegis-capable naval fleet and enhancing its Aegis Ashore capabilities. A key driver of the reinterpretation of the right of collective self-defense is to allow Japanese ships to not only track missiles aimed at friendly states but to intercept them as well. Australia has recently upgraded its Jindalee over-the-horizon radar capabilities that are a key BMD asset and its new Hobart-class air warfare destroyers are scheduled to be Aegis-capable as well. Japan and Australia’s growing commitment to the US-led regional ballistic missile defense system will bring a new depth and scope to the trilateral security relationship and to Australia and Japan’s contribution to US forward defense.

2 Antidotes

Japan and Australia’s simultaneous deepening of their respective alliance relationships with the US, entwined with the rapid and ongoing development of their bilateral security relationship, offers two antidotes to problems with the United States’ continuing regional security primacy.

First, focusing on Australia, it provides a very useful corrective to the idea that trade figures determine strategic interests and the future direction of security relationships. Outside of the unique case of North Korea, Australia has the highest and fastest rising level of export dependency on China, with over a third of Australian exports heading to satisfy Chinese demand. Yet there is little sign to date that the deepening of Australia’s security commitment to the US and Japan is having a detrimental effect on this crucial trading relationship, confounding critics’ predictions. Rather, at the same time that Australia’s trade relations are becoming increasingly centered on China, Australia’s security relationship with China’s two major rivals and sources of security angst, the United States and Japan, are deepening, broadening, and becoming more integrated.

Second, the bipartisan commitment in Tokyo for a more proactive regional security contribution that is behind the enhanced Japan-Australia security relationship and deepening alliance relationship with the United States can bulwark the US rebalance. India and Vietnam, the two most important new security partners for the US in the region, both face domestic political limitations to how far they are willing to strengthen security ties with the United States. Neither face the same limitations when it comes to strengthening these ties with Japan. Closer security relations with Japan can enhance India and Vietnam’s support for the present US-led regional security order. To a much more moderate extent, other Southeast Asian states also are sensitive about becoming too close to the United States and to Japan. Closer security relations with Australia, a distant middle power, are less encumbered by such sensitivities as reflected by the Five Power Defence Arrangements.

The rapid development of the Japan-Australia security partnership over the last decade and into the future is anchored in their respective alliance relationships with the United States and support for US regional leadership. This partnership is a reminder that one of the greatest sources of US regional leadership is the large and growing number of states that see this leadership as an irreplaceable source of regional stability and the support of it to be in their national interest.

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