JAPAN AND AUSTRALIA - TRADE AND SECURITY PARTNERS

In mid-March 2007, 55 years after the resumption in 1952 of diplomatic relations between Australia and Japan following World War Two, the governments of both countries signed in Tokyo a significant agreement on security matters. Japan’s leader, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, told a joint press conference after the signing - “Prime Minister Howard and I agreed that the joint declaration offers a framework for concretely stepping up security ties between our two countries.” Australia’s leader, Prime Minister John Howard, stated prior to the signing, “Australia has no better friend or more reliable partner within the Asia-Pacific region than Japan. We are great Pacific democracies. Japan has had a strongly rooted practice of democracy now for more than 60 years.”

In essence, the agreement, formally known as the “Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation”, commits both nations to some seven key undertakings. These are - intelligence sharing; joint defence force exercises; law enforcement; anti-terrorism measures; disaster relief; foreign and defence ministerial dialogue; and support for Japan’s permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council.

The Declaration is the only additional security arrangement into which Japan has ever entered, apart from its Alliance with the United States. Australia, therefore, is clearly of high importance to Japan in terms of Tokyo’s perceptions of its own interests.

Diplomatic undertakings between Japan and Australia are not without precedent or substance. In 1957, both countries negotiated a Commerce Agreement which laid the foundations of what became a burgeoning trade relationship - valued at some US$32 billion in two-way trade in 2004/05. In 1974, a Cultural Agreement was signed and in 1976, Prime Ministers Takeo Miki and Malcolm Fraser signed a Basic Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, promoting close bilateral relations spanning political, economic, social and cultural spheres. The March 2007 Declaration is a logical extension between both nations of diplomatic and economic relations which have now existed for some five full decades.

For Australia, Japan is a major protagonist in the Asia-Pacific region - with the second largest economy in the world (Japan’s Gross Domestic Product in 2004 amounting to 525.3 trillion Yen or an estimated US$4.6 trillion) and the third most powerful military force in the world (ranking just behind the United States and the People’s Republic of China with an annual budget of US$41 billion and some 250,000 men and women under arms.) Japan’s direct foreign investment in Australia in 2004 amounted to some US$14.4 billion. At least 19,000 Japanese students attend Australian Universities each year, whilst almost 700,000 Japanese tourists arrive in Australia each year to spend their holidays. It is these statistical dimensions which make the ongoing, robust and well developed relationship between Australia and Japan so important.

For Japan, Australia is a major supplier of mineral resources and foodstuffs - providing large quantities of coal, iron ore, oil and natural gas, all vital commodities for Japanese
industry. Holding the world’s largest known uranium deposits, Australia is also highly important for Japan’s civilian nuclear needs and policies.

Specifically in terms of the Security Declaration, Prime Ministers Abe and Howard reaffirmed that “the strategic partnership between Japan and Australia is based on democratic values, a commitment to human rights, freedom and the rule of law, as well as shared security interests, mutual respect, trust and deep friendship.” They also stated that they are committed to “the continuing development of their strategic partnership to reflect shared values and interests.”

Washington has itself strongly supported closer security ties between Tokyo and Canberra. In March 2006, Japan, the United States and Australia inaugurated a three-way security dialogue of foreign ministers. By establishing in 2007 a “two plus two” forum of foreign and defence ministers from Japan and Australia - similar to those each already has with the US - Tokyo and Canberra want to strengthen security cooperation among the three nations.

This matter of trilateralism (among Australia, Japan and the US) - described by some commentators as an “emerging axis of democracy” - has important ramifications for another (rising) Asia-Pacific power, China.

Certainly, both Tokyo and Canberra have been at pains to dismiss suggestions that strengthened security ties could strain their links with China, saying that the just-signed security pact is not directed at that country. Indeed, both Abe and Howard have maintained that the Declaration is not a formal military alliance but rather is a memorandum of understanding.

China expressed some concern over the security agreement between Japan and Australia while assuring the international community that Beijing did not pose a threat to other nations. In response to Australian and Japanese statements that their security pact is not aimed at China, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman Qin Gang said in Beijing: “We hope what they said is true. China will not invade or threaten other countries, so we have nothing to fear. We remain unperturbed.”

What, then, are the implications and likely effects of the Declaration upon the Asia-Pacific region? A number of aspects present themselves. First, it appears that China is prepared to partially accept reassurances from Canberra, Tokyo and Washington that the new trilateral agreement does not directly threaten Beijing. China, however, will continue its own military build up, with a stated defence budget for 2007 of 347.2 billion Yuan (or some US$44 billion) - a figure regarded by a number of Western military analysts as being only one third or less of the actual amount of Chinese defence modernization expenditure. Second, there could conceivably be further joint military interaction between Japanese and Australian forces along the lines of that which has already occurred in Samawah, Iraq, and in Sumatra, Indonesia, following the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004. Third, the United States will continue to be the principal
guarantor of Japanese and Australian territorial integrity and overall military security. 40,000 US troops are stationed in Japan and Australia hosts vital US intelligence facilities in Pine Gap and elsewhere on its own soil. Fourth, Australia will carry on the process, commenced during the 1980s under the Hawke government, of greater enmeshment with Asia, by means of establishing cordial relations with principal countries and supra-national organizations (such as ASEAN and APEC) in that region. Fifth, Japan will proceed to adopt a new assertiveness in its international relations, seeking to break away from decades of Yoshida-style foreign policy doctrines and gaiatsu (‘foreign pressure’) influences upon its diplomatic actions.

It is clear from the 2007 Security Declaration that Australia and Japan have entered a new, broader phase in their relationship. In some respects, this is not surprising as both nations have had extensive and highly profitable trading linkages for 50 years now. What is new, however, is a closer defence dimension to the relationship. It is natural for both governments to foster and protect their joint interests. The Security pact does precisely that and indicates to the entire Asia-Pacific region that Tokyo and Canberra view their futures as being inextricably joined together. This diplomatic solidarity is based upon a now formally recognized political, economic and social interdependence. Although the pact is not a specifically military alliance as such - whereby both countries pledge to defend the other in case of aggression or attack - it does revolve around military matters, these being the sharing of sensitive strategic intelligence and the conduct of joint exercises by the land, air and sea forces of each country. Furthermore, there is also a law enforcement aspect as well as humanitarian disaster relief measures and support for a strengthened role for Japan in the United Nations. Australia and Japan have thus linked their futures together and demonstrated to their peoples and to the world that they are not only friends but defensive partners as well.

There is a certain historic irony to such matters, given the bitter experiences of both countries during World War Two. To those Australians and Japanese who endured the War, it seems inconceivable that the former enemies could ever conclude such an agreement. Nonetheless, they have done so. Major-General Bill Crews (retired), the National President of the Australian War Veterans association, the RSL, described how some members were upset with the decision. “There are a few, and I stress a few, World War Two veterans who personally suffered some horrific experiences at the hands of the Japanese during the Second World War,” he said. “We must respect their concerns at this relationship.” Prime Minister Howard also addressed this issue by saying: “You never forget the past. You move on from the past, and you don’t allow the past to contaminate what you do in the present or in the future. But you can’t ever be expected to forget the past.” Howard went on to say: “Australia won’t forget her history - we shouldn’t. But we shouldn’t allow the history to be the master of what we now do and what we do in the future, and Japan and Australia have a common destiny in this part of the world. We share what is now a 60-year common practice of democracy.”
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SOURCES


“Japan, Australia sign security pact; China voices concern” ZEE NEWS LIMITED, 13 March 2007.


