

Australia's relationship with Japan: changes, drivers and future directions

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Abstract:

Since it began almost 200 years ago, the Australia-Japan relationship has proved resilient, weathering storms and strains to develop into a strong, mature and mutually beneficial partnership founded on and supported by trade, girded by shared values and strengthened by security cooperation. The relationship continues to evolve, with recent years seeing renewed enthusiasm for even closer bilateral relations as well as enhanced trilateral cooperation with mutual ally the United States. Drivers of this change ranging from domestic political changes through to geopolitical challenges, most prominently the rise of China, are likely to persist in the short to medium term and promote even closer cooperation between Japan and Australia, as well a heightened sense of self-reliance in each country that will push them to take increasing responsibility for their own future rather than rely on the United States. This in turn will provide an opportunity for the two countries to play a greater role in shaping and safeguarding their own futures as well as that of their Asian neighbourhood.

キーワード : オーストラリア、日本、貿易、安全保障、同盟

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The modern Australia-Japan relationship is one between two robust democracies with advanced and sophisticated economies, underlain by a shared fundamental commitment to a stable and prosperous region. It is characterised by friendship across diverse and broad-ranging sectors, from culture through trade to security.

Having gone through many ups and downs over the more than 180 years since the first recorded contact between the two nations, most significant of which was when the two countries were on opposite sides during a bitter World War II campaign, Australia and Japan quickly put past animosities aside to forge a long-standing, mutually beneficial partnership anchored by trade and underscored by grass roots person-to-person ties that has since spread into other areas, most recently and importantly security.

The current trajectory of bilateral relations is towards increasing closeness in relation to the two key pillars of the partnership, trade and security. This course is being driven by

policy responding to the changing regional geopolitical landscape, especially vis-à-vis China, as well as the domestic political and economic situation in mutual ally the United States. It is likely that this trend will continue under the present conservative governments in power in Japan and Australia; however, liberal administrations, while unlikely to change the fundamental policy direction of the conservatives, could have a dampening effect on the momentum of current policy. Assuming the maintenance of each country's security relationship with mutual ally the United States, this also means the Australia-Japan bilateral relationship has the potential to become increasingly significant to preserving security in the Asian region, particularly in North and Southeast Asia.

Establishment and development of the relationship

First contact

Australia-Japan ties sprung firstly from trade, when in 1831 an Australian whaling ship sought refuge in Hokkaido after sustaining storm damage, and later in the 19th century through culture, the first Japanese encountered by Australians' being traveling performers, some of whom subsequently married Australians and settled in the country (Meaney, 1999). In 1883, the first Japanese migrants left for Australia to work as pearl divers but relations soured when more and more Japanese migrated to Australia to work in both the pearling and sugar cane industries, leading to the adoption of the 'White Australia' policy in 1901 (Nakamura, 2006), and then later reached their lowest point with the advent of World War II.

Trade

Australia was the first nation to open its doors to trade with Japan after World War II (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2007), the two countries signing the Australia-Japan Agreement on Commerce on 6 July 1957. This landmark agreement facilitated Japan becoming a key trade partner for Australia. Japan became Australia's largest export market in the late 1960s (and remained so for more than forty years after; McClean, 2008) and was its second largest source of imports by the early 1970s (Drysdale and Yamazawa, 1993). Japan also was, and continues to be, an important source of foreign direct investment and tourism revenue for Australia.

The two countries were active in promoting the establishment of regional trade architecture, cooperating to lay the foundations for the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council in the early 1980s and then the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation in 1989 (Drysdale and Yamazawa, 1993).

Despite these strong trade ties, however, thorns remained in the economic relationship. Negotiations towards a bilateral free trade agreement (officially termed an economic partnership agreement) progressed painfully slowly, stymied by the protectionist demands of domestic lobby groups.

Security

In the decades following the war, the Australia-Japan relationship focused almost entirely on economics (Miller, 2012). Memories of the brutal treatment of Australian soldiers by the Imperial Japanese Army still resonated strongly in the collective Australian consciousness; lingering suspicions as to whether Japan had truly repented of its wartime crimes prevented closer cooperation between the two countries on security.

However, with the passing of time, memories of World War II receded into history and this, as well as the mutual ally relationship with the United States, paved the way for the establishment of closer relations in the security field. The 2006 Australia-Japan Year of Exchange coincided with a significant stepping up of the security side of the bilateral relationship.

The long-standing (1996-2007) Liberal-National coalition government under Prime Minister John Howard prioritised stronger relations with Australia's major ally, the United States, and a key achievement of his government was even closer links with the world's number one economy (Dobell, 2013).

The Howard government also made a number of important policies achievements in relation to Japan. While he did not start security cooperation with Japan, Howard gave it sufficient priority, promotion and momentum to enable Japan to become Australia's fourth most important security partner after the United States, the United Kingdom and New Zealand (Dobell, 2013).

The first Joint Foreign and Defence Ministerial Consultations (2+2), announced by then-Australian Foreign Minister Downer and held on 6 June 2007, followed the signing of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership during the 2006 Australia-Japan Year of Exchange and the subsequent signing by Prime Ministers Howard and Abe of the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation in March 2007, the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Commerce Agreement (Downer, 2007). It is worth noting that at the time the Security Declaration was signed, then-Australian Opposition leader Kevin Rudd went on record to say that "there should be no step beyond the Declaration to a full defence pact with Japan...may unnecessarily tie our [Australia's] security interests to the vicissitudes of an unknown security policy future in north East Asia" (Dobell, 2013).

The ministerial consultations were a significant achievement, representing "the first time Australia had formalised with another country official meetings that encompassed both ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defence" and also the only such mechanism Japan had entered into with a country besides the United States (Miller, 2012).

The formalisation of Australia's security relationship with Japan effectively closed the loop between the US-Japan and US-Australia security alliances, making the alliance trilateral. At the time, Howard "said that the agreement meant that Japan would have a closer security

relationship with Australia than with any other country except the United States” (Dobell, 2013). The first Trilateral Strategic Dialogue at Ministerial level between the “three great Pacific democracies” (as Howard described them in 2005) was held in 2006 (Dobell, 2013).

Howard’s values, sentiments and priorities accorded perfectly with his Japanese counterpart at that time, then-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, a noted conservative and nationalist. Abe continued the ‘quiet revolution’ in Japanese foreign policy that had been progressing under his predecessor, Jun’ichiro Koizumi, who had hand-picked Abe to succeed him, and was much admired by Howard (Dobell, 2013).

A closer partnership – recent changes in the relationship

Closer partnership between the Australia and Japan has been foreshadowed by a analysts and commentators for some time. Way back in 1993, Kazuo Ogura, as Director-General of the Economic Affairs Bureau in the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, asked if there was any reason why the two countries couldn’t forge a “greater partnership”, noting among other things, their similar trade ethos supporting the market economy and free trade, and the high interdependence of the two countries’ economies (Ogura, 25 October 1993).

However, following a change of government in Australia in December 2007 to Labor after almost eight years under the pro-US alliance Howard Liberal-National coalition, engagement with Japan became overshadowed through a shift in Australian priorities to focus on emerging economies such as South Korea and China (Miller, 2012). While Labor, firstly under the Prime Ministership of Mandarin-speaking former diplomat Kevin Rudd and then Julia Gillard, the country’s first female head of government, did not unravel the Howard government’s achievements vis-à-vis trade and security relations with Japan, neither did it maintain the previous government’s momentum (Dobell, 2013). There was a discernible shift in direction and emphasis under Labor towards strengthening relations with China.

Since the return to power in both countries of conservative governments (the LDP, under Shinzo Abe, in his second stint as Prime Minister, retook the reins of government in Japan in December 2012, while the Liberal-National coalition led by Tony Abbott, defeated the Julia Gillard-led Labor coalition in Australia’s September 2013 General Election), there has been a renewed emphasis on the importance of the Australia-Japan relationship, particularly within a regional security context, in a similar vein to that of the previous Howard-Abe governments.

Trade- reaching of a long-held goal

After years of effort, the first round of negotiations towards concluding an Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) between Australia and Japan kicked off on 24 April 2007 under the conservative Howard and Abe governments. Following 16 rounds, the conclusion of negotiations was announced 7 April 2014 during Tony Abbott’s inaugural prime ministerial visit to Japan, with the Economic Partnership Agreement being signed on 8 July 2014 by Prime Ministers Abbott and Abe during the latter’s prime ministerial visit to Australia.

The deal is Japan's first free trade agreement with a major agricultural exporter (Terada, 2014). Under it, Japan promises to make a set of unprecedented concessions to Australia vis-a-vis liberalisation of Japanese agriculture in exchange for Australia dropping auto and home electronics tariffs (Doonan, 2014; Terada, 2014). The EPA fuelled hopes that it would lead to a breakthrough in Japan-US Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations that had reached a deadlock over autos and agriculture (Doonan, 2014), a hope yet to be realised.

A more active security partnership

Security has become such an important part of the Australia-Japan relationship that some commentators have argued that ties between the two countries are "key to regional stability" (Miller, 2012). Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott has referred to the partnership with Japan as one "for peace, for prosperity and for the rule of law" (Hurst, 2014).

Significant steps forward in the bilateral security partnership over the last seven years include the establishment of regular Joint Foreign and Defence Ministers (2+2) Consultations, and the signing of the Agreement Concerning the transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology in mid 2014 (Hurst, 2014).

An Australian Prime Minister for the first time took part in a meeting of Japan's National Security Council when Prime Minister Tony Abbott attended an NSC meeting during his April 2014 official visit to Japan (Scott, 2014). During Prime Minister Abe's visit to Australia in July 2014, he and Prime Minister Abbott tasked officials to develop a strategy to strengthen cooperation in the Pacific region (Office of the Prime Minister of Australia, 2014).

Other cooperative initiatives are already in the pipeline; during Prime Minister Abe's Australian visit, he and Prime Minister Abbott decided to commence negotiations on a defence cooperation agreement to reciprocally improve administrative, policy and legal procedures to facilitate joint operations and exercises (Office of the Prime Minister of Australia, 2014).

New regional order – drivers of relationship change

Impact of conservative governments

In Australia: The almost simultaneous return to power of conservative governments in Australia and Japan has certainly been one of the key drivers of change in the bilateral relationship.

In terms of trade, it was no coincidence that the 2013 change of government saw negotiations towards an Australia-Japan free trade deal, at a near-deadlock after six years under a Labor government that continued to provide assistance to the Australian auto industry and maintained tariffs on imported vehicles, move forward once again (Terada, 2014). The Abbott government's indication that it would cut tariffs on vehicles imported into Australia, Japan's second largest auto market, proved pivotal to conclusion of an EPA, as

elimination of auto tariffs was a key Japanese demand (Terada, 2014).

Inheritor of the Howard-era values-driven approach, the current Liberal-National coalition government has gone to some lengths to emphasise the importance of Australia-Japan ties and the common bonds shared by the two countries. Abbott has said: “Japan’s economic resurgence under Prime Minister Abe will be good for Japan, good for Australia and good for the world” (Abbott, 2014). Australian Defence Minister David Johnston said that Australia sought proactive defence cooperation with Japan and the United States based on “common democratic values” (McPhedran, 2014).

Abbott has gone so far as to describe Japan as an “exemplary international citizen” and reiterate his support for Japan reinterpreting its constitution (Hurst, 2014) to allow the exercising of the right to collective defence. Abbott’s public comments in support of Japan, as well as open criticism of China, prompted one commentator to declare: “Australia...has quite dramatically and unexpectedly taken sides” (Sainsbury, 2014).

Prime Minister Abe during his July 2014 official visit to Australia became the first Japanese Prime Minister to address the Australian Parliament (Hurst, 2014). Following his address, he received a standing ovation (Lee, 2014).

Expanding only slightly on his Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade-supplied briefing (which described the bilateral partnership as Australia’s “closest and most mature in the region” and “fundamentally important to both countries’ strategic and economic interests” (Dobell, 2013)), Abbott, publicly referred to Japan as ‘Australia’s best friend in Asia’ only a month after taking office as Prime Minister (Scott, 2014).

In Japan: Prime Minister Abe, since his first administration back in 2006-7, has placed priority on forging closer ties with Australia and pushed strongly for the conclusion of an EPA as well as greater bilateral defence cooperation (Takeda, 2014).

Under the conservative Abe, Japan is making the transition to a more active military role, both in relation to its alliance relationships with Australia and the United States, and globally. As part of his goal to see Japan become a ‘normal’ nation vis-à-vis the military, Abe has taken a number of steps to end long-standing bans that had acted to restrict Japanese defence activities and initiatives. On 1 July 2014, the Abe Cabinet decided to end Japan’s longstanding ban on exercising the right to collective defence (Hurst, 2014).

The realisation of a dream long-held by Abe, this achievement was preceded by a flurry of new initiatives introduced soon after Abe took power, including the establishment of a National Security Council, formulation of Japan’s first-ever National Security Strategy, which articulates Japan’s vision for being a “Proactive Contributor to Peace”, the adoption of new National Defense Program Guidelines that are seeing a long-called for increase in defence spending, and the relaxing of long-standing bans on arms exports (Ministry of Foreign

Affairs, 2014). While relations with Australia didn't drive the introduction of these initiatives, they will benefit significantly from the changed defence framework that Japan is now able to operate within.

Relationship with the US

Australia's and Japan's respective relationships with the United States and the desire of both countries to strengthen their partnerships with their senior alliance partner has been a driver for a number of recent policy initiatives in each country. For Australia, one policy decision that falls into this category is the decision to station 3000 more US troops at its marine base in Darwin in Central Northern Australia. In late 2013, very early on in its current term, the Abbott government, in a move aimed at strengthening Australia's alliance with the United States, directed a multibillion-dollar arms upgrade that saw Australia become the 7th largest arms buyer globally (Taylor, 2014).

For Japan, too, there is a strong desire to strengthen relations with the United States, particularly strategic cooperation. The Japanese government continues to work hard to reach workable solutions on the issue of US bases in Japan, including the nature of cost-sharing arrangements, while at the same time managing the concerns of residents near bases. Japan is also much more receptive to US overtures to become a more 'normal' nation in terms of its defence, realising the limitations on the ability of the United States to guarantee Japan's, and the region's, security. This will require Japan to assume greater responsibility for its own defence as well as the defence of its allies.

Regional issues including China

Clearly, China's growing political, economic and military power is a driver of change in the Australia-Japan relationship.

China surpassed Japan to become Australia's number one trading partner in 2007 (Lee, 2014). Australia's trade with China has tripled over the last seven years to be currently worth AUD141 billion (USD133 billion) (Taylor, 2014) and the country takes three-quarters of Australia's iron ore exports (Scott, 2014). China now accounts for 36 percent of Australian exports (Taylor, 2014) and 27 percent of Australia's two-way merchandised goods trade as opposed to Japan, which accounts for only 13 percent of two-way trade with Australia; 25 years ago the position of the two countries was largely reversed (Scott, 2014). As a consequence of China's growing trade weight, Japan has had to take a more aggressive approach in both securing the commodities it needs for itself and its industry and to selling its products to Australia. For its part, Australia must walk a finely balanced line between its new primary trading partner and its former number one trading partner of good faith and long standing.

China is also a key factor in security calculations not only between Australia and Japan and within the trilateral alliance with the United States but also for other countries in the Asian region. Australian Communications Minister Malcolm Turnbull has described Chinese

actions in support of its territorial claims in the South China Sea as “singularly unhelpful” and said the consequence was China’s neighbors “drawing closer to the United States than ever before” (Taylor, 2014).

For Japan’s part, it sees China’s growing power as a threat to itself. Japan has growing doubts about whether and/or how long US deterrence will remain effective in restraining Chinese aggression in the region. Concerns regarding US long-term commitment to the Asian region, whether because of political will, economic constraints or distractions in other regions (Goh, 2014) mean that Japan is unable to rely on its ally to protect it as it once could and so is now looking to enhance its self defence capabilities and to get others to help (White, 2014).

Future directions for the Australia-Japan partnership

Whether the current direction and momentum of the Australia-Japan relationship continues depends on a number of factors. These include the likelihood of a change in government in either country as well as changes in the domestic political and economic environment in mutual ally the United States.

Political and economic environment in Australia

A continuation of Liberal-National Coalition government in Australia would be expected to see current policy emphasising trilateral security cooperation between Australia, Japan and the United States move forward as a foreign policy priority. Japan would also continue to enjoy a more highly prioritised status among Australia’s trade partners based not only on its track record as a reliable trading partner and the relative long-standing and maturity of the bilateral relationship but also on the conservative government’s positive assessment of Japan as a country sharing Australia’s democratic free market values.

On the other hand, a Labor government could see a return to downplaying the Australia-Japan bilateral relationship in favour of currying favour with Australia’s current number one two-way trade partner, China (DFAT, 2013). In his speech to the Lowy Institute on 27 August 2013, only 11 days before a federal election that would see his Labor government thrown out of office, then Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd telegraphed such a likelihood in a foreign policy speech that mentions China no fewer than 22 times, more than Australian allies the United States (three mentions) and Japan (four mentions) put together (Rudd, 2013). Though he flags China as one of Australia’s five key relationships in Asia, it is notable that Rudd’s speech does not touch at all upon security matters in reference to China (Rudd, 2013).

With regard to trade, Australia’s economy relies heavily on its natural energy and mineral resources, which are characterised by high-value, long-term contracts. This is especially true for commodities such as LNG. Australia currently accounts for 61 percent of Japan’s iron ore imports and three quarters of Western Australia’s LNG exports go to Japan (Goh, 2014). Changes in Japan’s energy mix as a result of the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear accident and the subsequent shuttering of Japan’s nuclear power generation capacity will see

Japan needing to continue to import most of its energy requirements and thus it will remain an important trading partner for Australia, whichever stripe of government happens to be in power.

Political and economic environment in Japan

In his historic address to the Australian Parliament on 8 July 2014, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe gave a clear indication of the direction of the bilateral relationship under continued LDP stewardship. Placing Australia alongside mutual ally the United States at the forefront of Japan's future defence strategy, Abe told the parliament that their two countries would be "joining hands with the United States, an ally for both our nations" and highlighted Japan's aspirations to be a country that would work to build an international order upholding the rules of law and so make regional seas and skies "open and free" (McPhedran, 2014). Abe described the new agreement with Australia on defence technology as the first part of "engraving the special relationship in our future" (McPhedran, 2014). Australian strategic analyst Hugh White said that Abe's speech clearly marked Australia as one of the central planks of Japan's security plan for the Asia-Pacific (McPhedran, 2014).

Despite a two-decade long stagnation during the 1990s and 2000s, Japan is still the world's third-largest economy and "will remain Asia's most capable and advanced economy for decades" (Lee, 2014). Japanese firms have a large and important role (more so than Chinese counterparts) supplying capital and exporting innovation to neighbouring economies (Lee, 2014). Thus Japan is likely to remain an important regional economic player at the very least in the short to medium term. Given this, and its large middle class and domestic consumption market (Lee, 2014), Japan will thus continue to be a key trading partner for Australia, based on the complementarities of their economies for the foreseeable future.

Domestic US politics and changes in the domestic environment in the United States

As the junior partners in the trilateral alliance, both Australia and Japan can be subject to issues in the US domestic political environment that are not directly related to the bilateral/trilateral relationships but because of the sector concerned, have a spill over effect. The imperative on the US government to defer in the first instance to domestic interests, including powerful lobby groups, and the needs of the US polity means that responding to these interests may require making requests of its allies that, because of their weaker position within the alliance, they are not able to readily dismiss, even if meeting such requests goes against their own interests.

In trade, for example, demands by powerful domestic lobby groups in the United States to protect particular local industries places boundaries on the US government's negotiation position such that it may be unable to offer concessions sought by other parties even while demanding such concessions itself. This kind of unequal bargaining power can lead to the type of stalemate we see currently with the TPP, where Japan, despite concluding an FTA with Australia that will see the latter's beef exports become even more competitive against American rivals, failed to get the Obama administration to compromise on its demands that

Japan substantially reduce import tariffs on US beef (Terada, 2014)

In the area of security as well, the unequal power status of the trilateral alliance partners is likely to see a continuation of past practice in which the US demands, and gets, alliance partners to shoulder a greater proportion of the burden of maintaining a certain level of security and defence capability. This has been seen previously vis-à-vis the cost sharing arrangement for US bases on Japanese soil, as well as the recently-implemented increase in the number of US marines stationed in Darwin, Australia.

The United States, to a significant extent, has been supportive of Prime Minister Abe's efforts to bolster Japan's defence force capabilities by increasing military spending, lifting the ban on arms exports and widening the contingencies in which Japan's armed forces could be deployed (Soble, 2014) because this lessens the burden on the US for ensuring peace and stability in the region and globally.

Without a significant improvement in present economic conditions in the United States there is likely to be continued domestic pressure to tighten US government spending, including on the military. This means that the US government is likely to continue pushing for its allies to take on increased responsibility in regional security projects, such as military modernisation in Southeast Asia, that in the past would have been US-led (Soble, 2014). In June 2014, for example, the deputy commander of the US Marines in the Pacific urged the Australian Government to consider undertaking a more assertive policy role in the South and East China seas by deploying more navy vessels, alongside Japanese and American vessels to the north (Taylor, 2014).

Conclusion

Australia-Japan relations, though fractured and fraught at times, have remained resilient over the last almost 200 years of their existence. Adjusting to internal and external change, some of which has been outside either's control, the relationship has continued to move forward and mature, in no small part due to undergirding shared democratic values and a commitment to the free market and rule of law.

Having played such a central role in the two countries' early contact, trade has gone on to become a central pillar of the relationship, not just in a bilateral context but within broader, multilateral frameworks. Security, a much newer field of cooperation for the two allies, is proving a sector ripe for deeper, wider cooperation. Such cooperation, bilaterally and trilaterally with mutual ally the United States, has the potential to be a significant force for safeguarding regional stability and security, and for promoting and facilitating greater cooperation and confidence building between neighbouring countries in the Asian region.

The drivers of change in the Australia-Japan relationship, ranging from domestic politics through to the rise of China, are likely to see the relationship grow closer in the future,

regardless of the political persuasion of national governments. These changes are increasingly fostering an attitude where each country is prepared to take on more responsibility for its own future, particularly on security, realising that while the alliance with the United States remains an important safeguard, it can no longer be relied on without question as it had been in the past.

By shouldering more of the burden, however, Australia and Japan have the opportunity to have a greater say and play a more significant role in shaping and safeguarding their individual and collective future as well as that of the region more broadly.

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