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The New American-led Security Architecture in the Asia Pacific: Binding Japan and Australia, containing China

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When Prime Ministers Abe Shinzo and John Howard signed Japan's first comprehensive security agreement in half a century, and its only one apart from the treaty with the United States, the two countries raised five crucial foreign policy signals, and fundamentally securitised the relationship between the two countries.

John Howard with
Foreign Minister Aso

Firstly, the Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation [1] codifies and publicly acknowledges for the first time the existing wide-ranging security cooperation between Japan and Australia. Their bilateral cooperation already includes intelligence collaboration, Japanese bases in Australia, maritime cooperation, official exchanges, joint exercises, and counter-terrorism activities, in addition to joint participation in a wide range of mainly US-led multilateral activities. Already in 2006, Desmond Ball judged that: "the security relationship between Australia and Japan has now grown to the extent that, if the range of cooperative activities could be summated, Japan would be in the top five of Australia's security partners - after the US, UK, New Zealand, but ahead of Indonesia, [and that] Australia would probably rank in the top five in Japan's list of security partners." [2]

As with any such general treaty, secret attachments or MOUs will most likely spell out the details of new levels of cooperation. But beyond codifying the arrangements already in place, the Joint Declaration's statement of aims and the generality of the areas of cooperation it promises prefigure expansion into much more intensive collaboration in the future.

Secondly, by explicitly "affirming the common strategic interests and security benefits embodied in their respective alliance relationships with the United States, and committing to strengthening trilateral cooperation," Japan and Australia are signaling an overturn to a half century of East Asian security architecture. An anti-Soviet system of US-dominated but uncoordinated bilateral alliances is being replaced by a nascent anti-China US-dominated multilateral alliance system. The fact that South Korea, now moving closer to China and unpicking its joint military command with the US, is not yet included in this new arrangement, warns us that the East Asian politics behind this new tripartite security architecture is decidedly wobbly.

East Asia and the Pacific

Thirdly, while the only country other than the US mentioned by name in the Joint Declaration is North Korea, the pact is a clear signal of intent to exclude China. Precisely what degree of exclusion, not to say containment, of China, is intended is not yet clear. The contradictory pressures between wanting to ride the Chinese economic gravy train and beat the drum about supposed military expansionism are clear. But two things are certain.

On the one hand, despite the rhetoric about North Korea, the present government in Japan sees China as its most serious security threat and will not make a comparable defence pact with China. Australia may not see China in the same way, but it will not balance the defence pact with Japan with a parallel bilateral or multilateral security agreement with China, despite its economic commitment to - and dependence on - China.

On the other hand, the full meaning for China of the pact and the US-Japan-Australia alliance depends on the still unresolved policy conflict in the US as to how it, as the global hegemon, will respond to the rise of China to world power status. Once the US preoccupation with the 'war on terror' and the enfeebling debacles in Iraq and Afghanistan pass, then the question of whether the US will seek to contain the rise of China will move to the forefront of the Washington agenda. In the meantime, it is hardly surprising that the Chinese are assuming the worst.

Fourthly, the Joint Declaration confirms the already accelerating tendencies for both Japan and Australia to militarize their foreign policies. In Japan, over the past decade or so, more nationalist leaders have thrown off the restraints of their dovish conservative predecessors in an effort to make Japan "a normal country". The Self-Defence Forces (SDF), almost six times the size of Australia's military, are deployed in Iraq and the Indian Ocean as well as in UN peace keeping roles. The old mantra of "purely defensive defence" has given way to a declaration of a right to pre-emptive strike and the acquisition of the necessary offensive capacity. Special forces, intelligence satellites, missile defence, and normalizing overseas deployments are the order of the day. The most senior ministers in the Abe Junzo Cabinet have called for a debate on the acquisition of nuclear weapons.

The Joint Declaration also extends the Howard government's preference for military solutions, and adds a northern buttress to its mission of regional stewardship, albeit a mission under American delegation. Moreover, not only does the intensification of security relations with Japan follow on a similar Australian pact with Indonesia last year, it comes just one day after Indonesia and Japan announced they are stepping up defence cooperation. An Indonesian defence spokesman made the wider strategic point clear when he noted that "Japan has significant influence as a stabilizer in the region following the phenomenal development of China's and India's economies." [3]

Fifthly, the defence pact symbolizes the aversion both governments have to coming to terms with the genuine security problems facing the two societies and the Asia Pacific region. The Joint Declaration includes a brief reference to "human security", mentioning pandemics and disaster relief. In the 1980s Japan, recognizing the inadequacy of military solutions to issues such as energy insecurity and the consequences of global inequality, invented "comprehensive security", and developed the notion of human security far beyond what is talked about in Canberra. But in reality, while climate change, pandemics and energy insecurity pose real and present threats, Tokyo and Canberra are increasingly preoccupied with militarized responses to less palpable threats. Australia's defence budget of more than $22 billion towers over the $100 million allocated to assist regional neighbours with avian flu, while last year Japan, gave $47 million to assist ASEAN countries with bird flu.

Australia can expect to see more Japanese bases such as the intelligence satellite ground station at Landsdale in the Perth International Telecommunications Centre. It can expect more and closer cooperation between the Australian Defence Force and Japan's SDF in maritime interdiction for both border security and the US-led Proliferation Security Initiative. It can expect more joint exercises and training with the SDF in Australia. It can expect more testing of Japanese space vehicles from Australian test ranges. None of these are in themselves undesirable.

Yet even apart from the clear and imprudent intent to counter China, the past three decades of piecemeal accumulated defence collaboration codified in the Joint Declaration, most of which was initiated in secret and almost all lacking serious parliamentary scrutiny, carries a momentum which will lead to still further expansion. Moreover, the Declaration's vaguely worded promises of cooperation over "counter-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction" and "counter-terrorism" can easily be stretched to cover almost any conceivable contingency. Parliamentary and public debate about the kind of relationship we want with Japan, and scrutiny of what is pre-figured by the Joint Declaration, are urgent.

Mr. Abe's most recent denial of Japan's history of wartime sexual slavery was a disaster for Japan's claim, confirmed in the Joint Declaration, to be a country based "on democratic values, a commitment to human rights, freedom and the rule of law". Australia's decision to emphasize the military dimension of its relationship with Japan, in mutual concert with the United States, above an insistence on serious Japanese commitment to those values, demonstrates a profoundly imbalanced and imprudent understanding of the true interests and concerns of the peoples of both countries.

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Notes

[1] Australia - Japan Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation, 13 March 2007.

[2] Desmond Ball, Whither the Japan-Australia security relationship? Austral Policy Forum 06-32A 21 September 2006.

[3] RI, Japan to Increase Defence Co-operation, Jakarta Post 2007-03-13

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