Australia's new security agreement with Japan

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On 13 March 2007, John Howard signed a new security agreement with Japan during a visit to Tokyo. The new agreement, while well short of an 'alliance', specifies a number of areas for bilateral security co-operation, including military co-operation. That will open the door for Japanese troops to train in Australia.

This agreement reverses decades of Australian security policy. During the Cold War, we opposed the use of Japanese military power in the Western Pacific. Now we are advocating its use.

Thus three questions arise: Why are we doing this? Will it work? Can it be sustained?

What is the purpose of this agreement?

We are doing this because the Howard government believes that by embedding inevitable Japanese rearmament in a wider framework that includes the United States, we can help moderate its influence.

The 13 March agreement, even though it does reverse longstanding Cold War policy, did not come out of the blue. To the contrary, it builds on growing co-operation between Australia and Japan in recent years, including in the Proliferation Security Initiative, in ways that also involved close co-operation with the United States. Australia also provided combat troops to help protect the Japanese non-combat contribution to the Iraq war.

Recent years have also seen the expansion of bilateral US security dialogues with Japan and Australia into a formal Trilateral Security Dialogue to consist of regular meetings among the defence and foreign ministers of the United States, Japan and Australia. In March 2006, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice took part in the first of these trilateral dialogues, held in Sydney.

In early 2005, Australia and Japan, along with India, were at the forefront of tsunami relief operations in South and Southeast Asia that were led and co-ordinated by PACOM (US Pacific Command) in Hawaii. The tsunami relief effort greatly improved practical military co-operation among the parties.

Moreover, the United States and Japan, in recent meetings between the defence and foreign ministers on both sides, have agreed on major changes to improve the operational effectiveness of the US-Japan alliance. That is all intended to set the stage for combined US-Japan operations from major shared bases in Japan such as Camp Zama, Yokota and Kadena (in Okinawa).

In a wider regional context, the 13 March Australia-Japan agreement is based, rightly, on the belief that the power balance in North Asia is a vital issue for Australia's security. We cannot seek security in distance and irrelevance, as New Zealand does. That is because we know from our history the dangers of imbalanced power, both directly in the Asia-Pacific region and in the wider international balance. In early 1942, hostile Japanese forces appeared off our northern shores as a consequence of the breakdown of the power balance in far-off places. As that great Yale Dutchman Nicholas Spykman said before his untimely death in 1942, 'distance does not protect. There can be security only in balanced power.'

Thus the 13 March agreement must be seen not just in operational or bilateral terms, but in the wider context of how and whether the three great powers in East Asia can balance one another strategically. Currently, Japan is showing strong signs of strategic anxiety, and the new agreement seeks to help ameliorate that.

We should disregard China's complaints as blatantly self serving. Those Australians sympathetic to China's interests say this is a bad agreement — because China howls that it is being squeezed between the 'crab claws' of the US alliances with Japan and Australia.

But let's not forget that China's main objective in relation to Australia is to see us 'Finlandised', keeping our heads down the way the Southeast Asians already are, especially in relation to Taiwan. And China is using all the instruments at its disposal — including the booming resource trade and the influence of the Chinese diaspora in Australia — to try to achieve this objective.

If we were to let ourselves be 'Finlandised', we would lose our independence. We could make no important decision without having to look over our shoulders at Beijing. Australians have not fought hard in two global wars only to see us lose our independence to any East Asian power, especially one with a Leninist government. And

those Australians who complain that we are not sufficiently 'independent' of the US should be invited to think harder about our likely fate in a region in which China became the hegemonic power.

Can this agreement work?

Whether our new agreement with Japan can help achieve its objectives has to be seen in the wider context of what the US is trying to do — to help foster the 'peaceful' rise of China, while preventing Japan from becoming a wild card.

History is not encouraging in this regard. To the contrary, the rise of a new great power has nearly always led to war. Americans sometimes need to be reminded that the 'rise' of the United States led to war with Mexico and Spain. It would have led to another war with Britain over the Venezuelan crisis of 1895, had Britain not understood the difference between a war it could hope to win and one it was bound to lose. Moreover, it is unclear whether China can resolve its own central dilemma — how to build China's wealth and power by immersion in the global economy without giving up communist party control.

And can the United States really hope to keep Japan as a strategic dependant? Will Japan continue to be willing to rely on the United States for its nuclear and long-range maritime security? The signs are not encouraging because Japanese insecurity is clearly growing.

Japan, during the Cold War, was content to rely for its nuclear security on US extended deterrence because the US and USSR were enemies. The United States needed bases in Japan in order to present Moscow with the credible threat of two-front war. So the US-Japan alliance suited the interests of both parties. It also suited the wider region, because it both reassured Japan and cocooned Japanese military power. Thus the alliance also underpinned wider regional security, and thus Australia's security.

But the United States proved unable to foster the rearmament of Japan in politically safe ways, though it was able to do so with West Germany. And Japan, unlike Germany, emerged from the Cold War having been unable to settle the issues of World War II on terms acceptable to its neighbours.

Moreover, throughout history victory has tended to be the 'solvent of alliances'. In the case of the US-Japan alliance, the 'glue' was inherent in the fact that the United States took a fixed view of the USSR in 1949 and saw no reason to change it. Thus Japan had such enormous leverage on the alliance that it had no reason to worry that extended deterrence would not 'work'.

But the current US-China relationship does not mirror that between the US and USSR. The US and China are not friends, but they are not enemies either. So far at least, China does not threaten the US in the same way as did the USSR.

Moreover, the United States in the backlash from Iraq is keen for a deal, any deal, that will get the North Korean nuclear issue out of the headlines. Thus in February 2007 the United States entered into a dodgy deal supposed to lead to the denuclearisation of North Korea. Worse, it did so in cahoots with China, and in ways that left Japan feeling sidelined.

That is bound to remind any Japanese government of the 1971 'Nixon Shocks'— when Richard Nixon, with Henry Kissinger as his instrument, made a dramatic turn to China in the interests of US global strategy. Faced with rapidly growing Soviet power that threatened them both, the United States and China sank their differences and entered into an alliance of convenience that continued until the end of the Cold War. But America turned to China in ways that were especially painful for Japan.

Kissinger at the time, incidentally, believed that Japan could produce a number of nuclear weapons within the framework of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), and said so in 1974 to the then Australian ambassador in Washington. By that time, the Whitlam government had ratified the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, and Australia's 'nuclear attraction' under the Gorton government had faded. Japan had signed but not ratified the NPT.

Thus much of the 'glue' of the US-Japan alliance has been lost, and so Japanese strategic insecurity is rising. It is no longer taboo in Japan openly to question whether Japan can afford to rely on US extended deterrence. Indeed, Japan's highest circulation newspaper, the conservative *Yomiuri Shimbun*, recently published a long series on this question.

The United States, in order to satisfy Japan's requirements now, would have to extend its 'nuclear umbrella' to cover both China and North Korea. Yet there are clear signs that the umbrella now does not cover even North Korea, let alone China. Unless Japan can be satisfied on these issues, the question necessarily arises whether Japan can still afford to rely on US strategic protection. If it cannot, does it have any choice when it comes to deterrence?

Some Japanese say, at least publicly, that Japan could rely on conventional deterrence — using cruise missiles for example to 'strike enemy bases'. Indeed, they may genuinely believe that offensive capabilities that Japan acquires could remain non-nuclear. They may also genuinely believe that if Japan develops offensive capabilities within the cocoon of the US-Japan alliance, that will help to reinforce Japan's willingness to remain a US strategic dependant.

But it seems unlikely that Japan could hope to balance China's rapidly growing military capabilities without nuclear weapons. Moreover, South Korea, another US ally, is viscerally opposed to any sign that Japan might acquire any kind of offensive capability.

Certainly, Japan would pay a high price if it were to develop its own nuclear weapons, including inflaming tensions with countries such as South Korea. But such weapons could provide Japan with the only means of real independence in future.

So when we in Australia ask whether the US can hope to achieve its major task in North Asia — managing the 'peaceful' rise of China while retaining Japan as a US strategic dependant — it's hard to be optimistic. Thus there is also reason to doubt whether the 13 March agreement will 'work'.

Can the new agreement be sustained?

It is also open to doubt whether this new agreement can be sustained if the Australian Labor Party (ALP) wins this year's election. The ALP, under the new leadership of Kevin Rudd, and with Mark Latham thankfully off the scene, adheres closely to the US alliance. Mr. Rudd, a Mandarin-speaking former diplomat, also seems to see China clearly enough, although many in his Party do not.

But Mr. Rudd, understandably, has been circumspect about the 13 March agreement. If he becomes prime minister, will a Labor government be willing to accept the idea that Australia should help foster the expansion of Japanese military power, including by having Japanese ground forces train in Australia?

Certainly, if the government of Shinzo Abe, an assertive nationalist, continues to fumble with unresolved issues of the Pacific War — including the so-called 'comfort women' who were sex slaves of the Japanese during the Pacific war — political support in Australia for the 13 March agreement might be hard to sustain even if Howard remains in office. Among other things, Abe has appointed as foreign minister Taro Aso, whose family company enslaved Australian prisoners-of-war toward the end of World War II (discussed in the Winter 2006 issue of *Defender*).

It is beginning to dawn in Washington that Abe reflects the views of his maternal grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi, prime minister of Japan from 1957 to 1960 and one of the founders of the current ruling party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Kishi did much to earn his sobriquet 'monster of Showa', not only for his extreme right-wing views but for his legacy of enormous corruption. (Showa being the regime name for wartime Emperor Hirohito.)

Kishi spent three years in Sugamo prison after the war because he had signed the declaration of war on the US. From the day he was set free from Sugamo, Kishi never made any secret of the fact that he wanted 'independence' for Japan.

Moreover, Kishi was never charged with war crimes from the time that he was the economic czar of Manchukuo, Japan's puppet state in Manchuria from 1931 to 1945. These included helping to organize slave labour throughout the Empire. In addition, Kishi's cellmates in Sugamo, Yoshio Kodama and Ryokichi Sasakawa, became two of the most notorious ultranationalist *yakuza* bosses in postwar Japan, and were very helpful in Kishi's rise to power.

It is also beginning to dawn in Washington that many of Abe's hardline supporters also believe that the United States 'tricked' Japan into war in 1941. That is obvious to anyone who visits the notorious refurbished Yushukan (Museum) at the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo, where executed war criminals including wartime prime-minister Tojo were 'enshrined' in 1978. Abe himself has refused to answer questions about this, something he can get away with in Japan because he is protected by the notorious 'kisha' or press clubs.

To his credit, on his March visit to Tokyo Howard told Abe to 'stop quibling' on the comfort women issue, when Abe seemed intent on backing up those pushing the ridiculous argument that Japan's military had not been involved in setting up organised brothels utilising forced prostitution based on exploiting women from conquered countries. Indeed, the testimony in Congress on 15 February 2007 by the Australian 'comfort woman' Mrs Jan Ruff O'Herne, was especially devastating for the deniers in Tokyo. Australians visiting our War Memorial in Canberra can see Mrs O'Herne's embroidered handkerchief mounted on a wall.

Abe's visit to the United States in late April 2007, his first since taking office last September, was overshadowed by this issue, even though a non-binding resolution in the US House of Representatives on the 'comfort women' issue will not be voted on until after Abe's visit. (It seems highly likely that the resolution, sponsored by Michael Honda, a Democrat from California, will pass this year now that Democrats now control both houses of Congress).

Encouragingly, there is rising opposition to Abe within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party because of his fumbling of the 'comfort women' issue, as well as growing doubts among the Japanese public as to his competence in managing Japan's pressing economic, social and demographic issues. With luck, he might be soon off the scene if the LDP does badly in Upper House elections in July. That might well return Japan to safer hands.

Still, it is obvious that divisions among the Japanese conservatives on security policy, submerged during the Cold War, are resurfacing with a vengeance. That is hardly surprising, as the consequences of the end of the Cold War continue to work themselves out. But the question of Japan's 'strategic trajectory' remains as murky as ever. In current circumstances, it's hard to see a Labor government consenting to the training of Japanese troops in Australia.

The 'what if' questions

The basis of our thinking should be the congruence of our interests with those of the United States. That congruence of interest has existed ever since Admiral Togo sank the Russian Combined Fleet in the Korea Strait in 1905, causing us to worry about what might happen if an overstretched Britain in future could no longer offer us maritime strategic protection. So we started to look to the great rising power on the opposite side of the Pacific, with whom we share common language and common values.

Thus today's imperative is to do what we can to help the United States manage the brittle balance of power in East Asia, within a global context in which America also has to deal with growing anarchy in the Middle East and all the ramifications of its botched occupation of Iraq, including in relation to Iran.

But we also need to keep in mind that the United States wants us to believe that Japan will remain a US strategic dependant, content to rely on the US for its nuclear security. That is natural, because the US also wants us to remain content to shelter under the US nuclear umbrella.

Naturally, our imperative is to think for ourselves. While not giving up on efforts to help slow the pace of nuclear proliferation, we have to think realistically about what might happen if these efforts fail. In particular, we must think hard about the likely consequences for us if Japan begins to think it needs nuclear weapons for its security. ◆

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