

# The future of security relations between Japan and Australia

## Interview with Akiko Fukushima



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### **Question 1: How do security relations between Japan and Australia contribute to regional stability in the Indo-Pacific and beyond?**

In the Indo-Pacific, diversifying security threats are increasing, ranging from North Korean WMD/CBRN (weapons of mass destruction/chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear) development and provocations, Chinese increasingly assertive actions in the East and the South China Seas, enhanced military cooperation among China, Russia and North Korea on a bilateral basis, to new areas such as cyber and space. Moreover, after the Hamas attack of Israel and Israeli counterattack since October 2023, the maritime security of the Indo-Pacific is under growing threat, for example in the Gulf of Aden with Houthi's attacks to merchant vessels and the US-UK counterattack against Houthi bases. The situation may expand to other conflicts in the Middle East. Given the instability in the Gulf, the bulk of merchant vessels from and to the Indo-Pacific are compelled to avoid the Red Sea in their shipping

services, affecting supply chains. The security threatening events in Ukraine, in Gaza, in Iran and possibly in the Indo-Pacific and their ramification are observed as more interconnected than ever. They deepen the security concerns for the stability in the Indo-Pacific, even increasingly affecting the national security of countries in the region.

Against these growing security threats and challenges, the US certainly plays a central role through their forward deployment and extended and integrated deterrence capabilities in the Indo-Pacific. The US allies in the region are also stepping up their security preparedness, cooperating closely with the US. In the past two decades, the role of Japan and Australia for the stability of the region has further gained impetus and weight. This is reflected in changes made in the respective security policies of Japan and Australia and their bilateral security relations. Japan has revised its interpretation of Article 9 of the Constitution on its collective defense with the US and its allies in 2015 and has decided to own counterstrike capabilities in the 2022 National Security Strategy. Australia has reduced its official warning time which is “the government’s calculation of the country’s window before a significant possible attack” from ten years to immediate.

Upon hindsight, Japan and Australia have led regional cooperation since 1978 when then Japanese Prime Minister Ohira Masayoshi proposed a regional economic cooperation in the Pacific Rim and when the follow-up meeting was held in Canberra, Australia in 1980. This led to the launch of a track 1.5 meeting of the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (PECC). Capitalizing on the PECC experiences, after the end of the Cold War in the same month of November 1989 when the Berlin Wall crumbled down, Japan and Australia launched the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) at Track 1. Since then, the two countries have led and promoted regional cooperation in the Asia Pacific, involving the US on economic cooperation.

Then came the security cooperation. Japan and Australia differed in their security perceptions due to the geographical distance from regional threats. Such differences, however, have recently narrowed due to the perceived growing security concerns in the region beyond the tyranny of geography and the ever-blurring borderline between military and non-military threats. This has led Japan and Australia to cooperate on the security front as well. After 9/11, Japan and Australia cooperated with the US in its *Operation Enduring Freedom* for Afghanistan. The two Defense Forces, that is Japan’s Self-Defense Forces and Australia’s Defense Forces, worked side-by-side in Samawah, Iraq when they both dispatched forces for peacebuilding and reconstruction. These joint efforts as the allies of the US have subsequently led to the Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation in 2007. In order to operationalize their cooperation, Japan and Australia concluded the [Information Security Agreement](#) on the sharing of classified information in March 2013. It is noteworthy that the Japan-Australia bilateral security cooperation aimed at the stability of the Indo-Pacific, as was explicitly mentioned when they agreed on the Special Strategic Partnership in 2014, which reflects interests of the two countries. Australia has identified the Indo-Pacific as a region relevant to its security in its White Paper in 2012, while the Indo-Pacific region is a key focus for Japan’s foreign policy since 2017.

Furthermore, in the latest Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation announced in 2022, Japan and Australia mapped out how the two cooperate for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific

(FOIP). In 2022 Japan and Australia also signed the Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) that establishes procedures for visiting forces and expedites cooperation between the two defense forces. The RAA eases the burden of conducting joint military training and exercises in each country by relaxing immigration control for troops and by simplifying procedures for transporting weapons and ammunition. It also eases the two forces to aid each other in cases of natural disasters. With the declaration and the RAA, Japan and Australia have stepped up their security cooperation by conducting more sophisticated bilateral, trilateral and multilateral joint drills and exercises and by promoting mutual use of facilities including maintenance, asset protection. These operations contribute to enhancing interoperability, personal links and trust between the two Defense Forces. Bilateral cooperation extends to intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance. They also cooperate in capacity building assistance for regional partners.

Japan and Australia are fully aware that any gap in their solidarity or attention deficit on potential security risks in the region will invite those actors who want to change the *status quo* to act. Given the aforementioned interconnectivity of security risks, the Japan and Australia security relations contribute to enhancing regional stability and beyond.

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**Question 2: In what ways do the collaborative security efforts between Japan and Australia enhance their ability to address common challenges, such as humanitarian assistance, maritime security and cyber threats?**

While there is a whole array of common challenges, Japan and Australia have started their collaborative efforts with Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) as illustrated in the cases of the Indonesian tsunami in 2004, the Great East Japan earthquake in 2011, the Typhoon Haiyan/Yolanda in Philippines in 2013 and the bushfire in Australia in 2019-2020. As for anti-terrorist operations, Australia and Japan cooperated in the United Nations Mission in the Republic of South Sudan (UNMISS) where Australian Defense Forces sent liaison officers to join the Japan Self-Defense Forces sent to the mission from 2012 to 2018. The cooperation has made the respective contributions more effective with the synergy effect, as I witnessed personally in South Sudan.

While bilateral cooperation started from HADR and anti-terrorist operations, maritime security has been identified as a common challenge as seas and oceans are a dominant feature of the Indo-Pacific. Shipping accidents, piracy, armed robbery incidents, sanctions evasions through ship-to-ship transfers, and illegal fishing are common concerns of Japan and Australia. In 2012, Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo published an article, "Asia's Democratic Security Diamond", in *Project Syndicate*. In the article, Abe recommended

Australia, India, Japan and the US to form a security diamond to safeguard the maritime commons from the Indian Ocean to the Western Pacific. Abe was concerned with Chinese assertive activities in the South China Sea then, reclaiming land and building military facilities in disputed features in the Spratleys Islands.

In order to enhance maritime security, Japan and Australia conduct joint drills and exercises – bilateral, trilateral involving US and multilateral. For example, in 2023, Australia participated in *Yamazakura 85*, which Japan and the US have conducted since 1982. Japan has also dispatched F35s to Darwin and Tindal, Australia on a regular rotational basis since 2023 for joint drills. Japan also participates in *Talisman Saber*, a multilateral exercise in which 13 countries participated in 2023. These operations enhance collective ability to maintain maritime security and readiness to respond to contingencies.

In addition, Japan and Australia have provided capacity-building assistance to countries in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific to enhance their respective coast guard capabilities. Moreover, Japan and Australia, under the framework of the Quad, are enhancing Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), which is key to maintaining safe waterways. At the 2022 Quad Leaders' Summit in Tokyo, the Quad leaders announced the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) to enhance existing maritime domain awareness capabilities by sharing information as well as to boost training. Through this initiative, the Indo-Pacific should be able to detect and respond to illicit maritime activities such as illegal fishing, climate events and humanitarian crises.

Another transborder challenge that Japan and Australia are pursuing is cyber threats which cannot be addressed by a single country alone. Japan and Australia have been holding Cyber Policy Dialogue annually since 2015 (except the interruption due to the pandemic) based on the agreement between then Prime Minister Abe and Prime Minister Abott. Japan and Australia aim to uphold international law and norms in cyber space including raising costs on threat actors who make cyber space less secure. In the 2022 Joint Declaration, Japan and Australia included cyber to build structural resistance to malicious cyber activity, to combat cybercrime, to protect critical information infrastructure and to enhance cybersecurity in the region. Japan assists the ASEAN Cybersecurity Capacity Building Center in Thailand and provides training and technical assistance through JICA (Japan international cooperation agency).

**Question 3 : What role do the strategic partnerships and security agreements between Japan and Australia play in promoting mutual interests and countering potential geopolitical threats through multilateral and minilateral cooperation in the Indo- Pacific region?**

On top of the US forward deployment in the Indo-Pacific, its allies and partners have structured hub-and-spoke security architecture for long. While the US remains as a central actor in the region, Japan and Australia have strengthened their security partnership as mentioned above. This adds the spoke-to-spoke leg to the hub-and-spoke architecture. This makes the regional architecture more of a wheel or a network type. In fact, the 2022 Joint Declaration stated that *“Our bilateral partnership also reinforces our respective alliances with the United States that serve as critical pillars for our security, as well as for peace and*

*stability of the Indo-Pacific. Deepening trilateral cooperation with the United States is critical to enhancing our strategic alignment, policy coordination, interoperability and joint capability”.*

However, the Japan-Australia security partnership is not termed as an alliance and is sometimes dubbed as “quasi-alliance” by some as it falls short of the bilateral security treaty. However, this partnership is now supported by numerous security agreements as mentioned above and is an important piece of coalition-building in the region.

In the Indo-Pacific we have witnessed a vogue of minilateralism for coalition-building such as numerous trilaterals, US-Japan-Korea, US-Japan-Australia, and US-Japan-Philippines or the quadrilaterals such as the Quad. These minilateral formats focus on a specific agenda and are agile and adaptable to the changing security environment. They are not competing with each other but form a multi-layered architecture for regional security.

Meanwhile, I am afraid that the Indo-Pacific is not ready for a regional security organization like NATO. In the past, the region failed in building a collective security architecture, namely the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), which collapsed with the escalation of the Vietnam war and ended in 1977. Because the region includes countries with varying military preparedness, with remaining unresolved border issues, with varying security threat perception on China, North Korea and Russia, with varying foreign policy orientations, with varying relations amongst each other and with various levels of strategic autonomy that each pursues, a regional security organization is not likely in the foreseeable future. As a matter of fact, countries in the Indo-Pacific have a sizable economic relation with China, which is the major if not the top trading partner for many countries in the region despite security concerns they respectively embrace. These differences prevent the region from opting for a regional security complex as argued by Barry Buzan<sup>1</sup>. However, I would like to note the article by Michael Green, the CEO of the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney in *Foreign Policy*, on September 6<sup>th</sup>, 2023, entitled “Never Say Never to an Asian NATO”<sup>2</sup>. He argues that the US and partner governments may not pursue an Asian NATO today, but, Green explains, it is more plausible than in the past because “*the US has lost its preponderance of military power in the maritime domain*” and due to “*increased China’s and North Korea’s direct military threats*”. Green observes that if security concerns surpass concerns on trade, regional cohesion or retaining strategic autonomy, the region may opt for a collective security institution.

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<sup>1</sup> Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Green, “Never Say Never to an Asian Nato”, *Foreign Policy*, 6 September 2023.

While a regional security organization might be a possibility in the future, today Japan and Australia as partners in the Indo-Pacific need to cooperate further for the stability of the Indo-Pacific for themselves as well as for the region. Should there be any Achilles Heel in the partnerships, and should there be any perceived attention deficit in the region, this will create an appetite for those who would like to change the *status quo* in the Indo-Pacific and will increase geopolitical risks.

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