



## **The Australia-Japan Security Agreement: Between a Rock and a Hard Place?** By Brendan Taylor

Australia and Japan have just signed an historic security agreement. This new pact formalizes the security cooperation that began in secret between the two nations in the 1970s and which has been moving forward in leaps and bounds since the early 1990s. It specifies a number of areas for security cooperation, including counter-terrorism, maritime and aviation security, peace operations, and disaster relief. It foreshadows further intelligence collaboration and high-level strategic dialogue. While the agreement itself is not binding, the prospect of a formal security treaty between Australia and Japan has been floated.

Australia and Japan are natural allies. They are liberal democracies with similar economic and political values. They are the U.S.'s closest security partners in the Asia-Pacific. And like the United States, they are essentially "outsiders" in this part of the world. Samuel Huntington has described Australia as a "torn country," a society divided over whether it belongs to Asia. Despite Japan's geographical location, Huntington describes it not as an Asian power, but as "a society and civilization unique to itself."

Canberra and Tokyo have been building an impressive record of collaboration, especially since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. They, plus South Korea, were the only regional players to send military personnel to support U.S. military operations in both Afghanistan and Iraq. They, along with the U.S. and India, were at the forefront of the international response to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. They have actively participated in a range of U.S.-led security mechanisms, including the Proliferation Security Initiative and the ministerial-level Trilateral Security Dialogue. Their militaries have cooperated on UN peacekeeping operations, most notably in Cambodia and East Timor.

Amid the hype of the new Australia-Japan security agreement, however, the substantial limits to deeper strategic collaboration between the two countries have gone unacknowledged. The limits to Beijing's patience in the face of perceived collusion between Canberra and Tokyo have also been downplayed. In the process, the limits to Australia's continued ability to balance its relations with China and Japan have been exposed.

Stark resource inequalities stand in the way of further, more formal strategic collaboration between Australia and Japan. The Australian Defense force is only a fifth the size of its Japanese counterpart and is struggling to maintain its current operational tempo. Australia's defense budget is a third the size of Japan's. Although the same could be said of Australia's alliance with the U.S., Canberra's largely symbolic contributions to U.S.-led expeditions have been tolerable due

to the superpower's overwhelming military superiority. But Japan's capacity for power projection remains limited. And while its intelligence capabilities appear to have improved significantly in recent years, these too have a long way to go before matching the level of intimacy enjoyed by Australia and the United States.

The new Australia-Japan security agreement is consistent with Washington's desire to engineer a transformation of its bilateral network of alliances into one in which the junior partners (or spokes) in that structure work together in ways that are congruent to U.S. interests. Yet however much Australia-Japan security ties are strengthened, they will remain heavily conditioned by their respective alliances with the United States. These will continue, at least for the foreseeable future, to be regarded as Canberra's and Tokyo's single most important strategic relationships. They will inevitably shape (and limit) the speed, scale, and scope of Australia-Japan security collaboration.

U.S. influence notwithstanding, Australia and Japan also have very different strategic interests. They inhabit sub-regions with contrasting security dynamics. This divergence is sharpest in relation to China. Canberra is the more sanguine on this issue, emphasizing commercial opportunities but outwardly ignoring inexorable military and strategic implications.

Tokyo, for reasons of history and geography, feels more acutely threatened. China and Japan are the two historical great powers of East Asia. Each has aspirations for leadership and influence over this region. The dilemma this creates for Canberra is severe, bearing in mind that Japan and China remain Australia's number one and number two trading partners, respectively. Open hostilities between them would clearly be catastrophic for Australia.

The new agreement does not require Australian military support in the event of such a conflict. This reaffirms just how far it is from constituting a formal security alliance. But that is not how the pact will be read in Beijing, despite Australian Prime Minister John Howard's assurances to the contrary. China, after all, has previously characterized Australia and Japan as claws of an American crab that wants to contain it. This new agreement therefore puts Canberra between a rock and a hard place.

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