

Japan in Australia's 2016 Defence White Paper

Amy King

Australia's security cooperation with Japan has deepened since 2013, when the Abbott Government came to power. Australia and Japan have signed three high-level agreements on defence logistics, information sharing and science and technology, namely the Japan-Australia Acquisition and Cross-servicing Agreement, the Japan-Australia Information Security Agreement, and the Japan-Australia Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology Agreement. The two countries have also stepped up their joint participation in military training exercises, and have used bilateral, trilateral and multilateral regional forums to air coordinated language about regional security issues. And Japan remains the most prominent—if no longer the only—country bidding for Australia's future submarine project.¹

Of course, the Australia-Japan security relationship predated the Abbott Government. It particularly intensified in 2007, under the Howard Government, when Australia elevated the bilateral relationship to a security partnership, and was then “quietly but substantially expanded” under the Rudd and Gillard governments.² Nevertheless, over the past three years there has been a pronounced acceleration in Australia's security ties with Japan, culminating in former Prime Minister Tony Abbott's references to Japan as Australia's ‘ally’ and ‘best friend’ in Asia.

Given all this we could have expected to see much greater reference to Japan in the 2016 Defence White Paper (DWP2016).³ This was not the case. To be sure, DWP2016 made reference to the post-2013 developments in the Australia-Japan bilateral security relationship, including the new high-level agreements (para 5.60). It also foreshadowed greater cooperation—including trilateral cooperation with the United States—in developing military capabilities such as the Joint Strike Fighter, missile

¹ Amy King, ‘Subtext Important to the Australia-Japan Sub Deal’, *East Asia Forum*, 31 March 2015.

² Hugh White, ‘An Australia-Japan Alliance?’, *Centre of Gravity* series no. 4 (Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, 2012), p. 2.

³ Department of Defence, *2016 Defence White Paper* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2016).

defence systems and maritime warfare technologies (para 5.61). Furthermore, the White Paper signalled Australia's intention to develop a bilateral legal framework with Japan that would facilitate these joint security activities (para 5.62). This is particularly important for a country such as Japan, which has historically refrained from joint military cooperation with any other country except for the United States due to Constitutional and other domestic legal strictures. Nevertheless, DWP2016 represents more of an incremental iteration in the Australia-Japan security relationship than a dramatic turning point.

The language in DWP2016 builds on similar statements in the 2013 and 2009 White Papers, which were produced under the two previous Labor governments. Those White Papers referred to deepening bilateral and trilateral defence cooperation with Japan, increasing joint military exercises, and developing greater cooperation in defence science and technology. While the 2016 White Paper goes further in specifically naming the Joint Strike Fighter, missile defence and maritime warfare as areas of joint cooperation in capability development, this is an evolution rather than a fundamental transformation.

Moreover, DWP2016 does not elevate the Australia-Japan security relationship to the kind of partnership that we might have expected had Tony Abbott remained Prime Minister. DWP2016 describes Australia and Japan as "close strategic partners" on the basis of our shared democratic values, decades-long economic partnership, common alliances with the United States, and mutual interest in a stable region and a rules-based global order (para 5.59).

The White Paper also endorses the Abe Government's legislative decisions to more actively contribute to regional and global security (para 5.59). However, DWP2016 makes clear that Japan is not in the same category as Australia's "allies the United States and New Zealand" (p. 22). Rather, it envisages Japan as just one of many security partners in the region, alongside Indonesia, India, Singapore, the Republic of Korea and China. Though an important partner, Japan is rarely singled out. This decision will likely disappoint the Japanese Government which has described Australia as its "second most important security partner after the US".⁴

More importantly, though, DWP2016 depicts an Australian view of the regional security order that differs in some important respects to the view currently held by Japan. DWP2016 makes clear that US leadership—underpinned by its economic and military power—"will be essential to the continued stability of the rules-based *global* order" (para 2.8, emphasis added). But the White Paper makes a distinction about the future US role in

⁴ 'Japan & Australia: A Complementary Relationship with Strategic Interests', Embassy of Japan in Australia, February 2016.

the region. DWP2016 does not state that US leadership is “essential” at the regional level, but only that “Australia welcomes and supports the critical role of the United States in ensuring stability in the Indo-Pacific region” (para 2.9). This is where Australia differs with Japan. Japan’s Abe Government is pursuing strategic policies designed to ensure that the United States maintains its post-Cold War position as Asia’s leading power. The Abe Government’s new security bills and revised US-Japan defence guidelines are designed to maintain, not change, the US-led order in Asia. In particular, they will allow Japan to work with regional allies and partners to resist what Japan sees as the most likely threat to that order: Chinese behaviour in the East and South China Seas.⁵

And here the Japanese government sees closer security cooperation with Australia as integral to maintaining the existing US-led regional order. Indeed, the Embassy of Japan in Australia has recently described Japan and Australia as “bookends’ sandwiching the western Pacific (East China Sea and South China Sea)”.⁶ This statement implies that the two countries could work together—alongside the United States—in thwarting Chinese efforts to change the status quo in the East and South China Seas.

DWP2016 does indicate Australia’s concerns about the fragility of the existing regional order, and is explicit that China’s military modernisation, lack of defence transparency, and behaviour in the East and South China Seas are undermining regional stability. Furthermore, DWP2016 is also definitive that the United States will remain Australia’s most important strategic partner, and that Australia will engage in operations to protect sea lines of communication in the Indo-Pacific region.

However, DWP2016 suggests that Australia may be less determined than Japan to lock in the existing US-led regional order. Instead, it recognises that China “will continue to seek greater influence within the region” commensurate with its growing economic and military power (para 2.12). Ultimately, Australia appears more willing than Japan to live with a greater regional leadership role for China.

The 2016 Defence White Paper represents a detectable shift between the Abbott and Turnbull governments’ views of Japan. This makes the forthcoming outcome of Australia’s submarine competitive evaluation process an even more important litmus test not only of Australia’s view of Japan, but also of the wider regional security order, and the place of the United States, Japan and China within that order.

⁵ Amy King and Brendan Taylor, 'Northeast Asia's New History Spiral', *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2016), pp. 108-16.

⁶ 'Japan & Australia: A Complementary Relationship with Strategic Interests', Embassy of Japan in Australia, February 2016.

While the submarine decision should have focused only on Australia's technological, capability and budgetary requirements, it has instead become conflated with Australian and Japanese views of Asia's future strategic order. The Japanese government has made clear that choosing the 'J-option' would signal that Australia and Japan share the "same fate in terms of security".⁷ DWP2016 suggests that this might not be the case.

Amy King is a Lecturer in the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University, where she researches and teaches Chinese foreign and security policy, China-Japan relations, and the international relations and security of the Asia-Pacific region.
Amy.King@anu.edu.au.

⁷ Aurelia George Mulgan, 'The Abe Push Behind the Australian Sub Deal', *East Asia Forum*, 16 March 2015.