

## Australia's New Foreign Policy White Paper: A View from Japan

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### What Makes this White Paper Important at this Particular Time?

In November 2017, the Australian Government released a new Foreign Policy White Paper, fourteen years since its last. The White Paper was widely reported by the Japanese media, including newspapers and television news outlets. As far as this author knows, it received the most coverage of any Australian foreign and security document—perhaps since the publication of the 2009 Defence White Paper. These reports generally stressed that the new White Paper takes a tough stance against China by ‘checking’ (or *kensei* in Japanese) its rise. The geographical concept of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ featured by the White Paper was also treated as evidence that Australia is enhancing its anti-China stance with other like-minded democracies in the region.

Behind such reports is a typical Japanese image of Australia as a nation that ‘swings’ between the United States and China. Given the current development of security cooperation with Australia, the Japanese public, as well as its policy community, has increasingly acknowledged the strategic significance of Australia for Japan’s security. Nonetheless, many ordinary Japanese still doubt if Australia is truly a trustworthy partner given its huge economic dependence on, and geographical distance from, China. In fact, not a few Japanese believe that Australia did not select Japan as a partner for Australia’s future submarine project out of concern over the possible Chinese reaction. From such a view Australia’s new White Paper may be seen as a ‘happy surprise’ as it demonstrates that Australia will eventually join an anti-China coalition with Japan, the United States and other regional democracies.

Such a view is, however, quite superficial, if not entirely wrong. The Australian Government and various intellectuals have commonly used the Indo-Pacific concept since approximately 2012. Canberra has gradually but surely become cautious about the rise of China, especially since the late 2000s, as demonstrated by the 2009 Defence White Paper, which emphasised China’s growing military strength and modernisation. More

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recently, China's espionage activities and its organised 'interference' in Australian politics, as well as its land-reclamation and militarisation of the South China Sea and growing influence in the South Pacific, have also strengthened Australia's concerns around China's rise. It was therefore unsurprising that the Foreign Policy White Paper took a cautious approach to China's growing power and influence, even if not directly referencing concerns over China's surging influence within Australia or perceived human rights abuses.

So what was the significance of this Foreign Policy White Paper? In this author's view, it was that Australia reconfirmed its position in international society at a time when the international order has become more uncertain and unpredictable. Since the 2016 US Presidential election, many Australian opinion leaders, including a former Prime Minister, have argued that Australia should keep some element of distance from the United States and restructure its relations with regional countries including China. The famous phone conversation between President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull—in which Trump reportedly cut the call short furious about the refugee swap agreed during the Obama Presidency—infused such a view among US sceptics.

Despite growing scepticism surrounding US regional and global leadership, the new White Paper reconfirms Australia's continuous commitment to an "open, inclusive and prosperous Indo-Pacific" (p. 3). The White Paper also articulates that Australia's security and prosperity will be protected only in "a global order based on agreed rules rather than one based on the exercise of power alone" (p. 7). While acknowledging that "China's power and influence are growing to match, and in some cases exceed, that of the United States" in parts of the Indo-Pacific, the White Paper states that "the United States will, for the foreseeable future, retain its significant global lead in military and soft power" (pp. 25-26). The White Paper also judges that "the United States' long-term interests will anchor its economic and security engagement in the Indo-Pacific" (p. 26) even under the Trump administration. At the same time, the White Paper warns against threats caused by protectionism and anti-globalist sentiment emanating from the United States, and stresses Australia's role in maintaining an open and inclusive economic order.

In short, Australia's new Foreign Policy White Paper demonstrates to both international and domestic audiences that, although the existing liberal order is being undermined, Australia will continue to act as a 'guardian' of the liberal international order. This conclusion may be unsurprising for those familiar with Australia's foreign and security policy tradition. Nonetheless, reconfirming such a 'common sense' view of Australia's foreign policy is important at a time when nothing can be taken for granted any longer. The White Paper, while not surprising, is significant because it endorses Australia's continuous commitment to a liberal international order, for the foreseeable future, at least.

## Implications for Japan's National Security

Like Australia, Japan has recently strengthened its commitment to liberal order-building through its 'free and open Indo-Pacific strategy', announced by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in August 2016. Moreover, Japan has tried to maintain the US military presence in the region. For Abe, a strong personal relationship between he and Trump has been key for servicing and securing the alliance with the United States. Japan also shares the view that the regional economic order should be open and inclusive without relying on protectionism or an anti-globalisation movement, as demonstrated by its effort to maintain the framework of the Trans-Pacific Partnership. It was this shared vision for a 'desirable international order', rather than a shared perception of material threats, that has been the foundation for a strong political, economic and security relationship between Japan and Australia since the Cold War era.

It is therefore quite natural that the White Paper mentions Japan as the most important 'Indo-Pacific partner' next to the United States. As stated in the White Paper, the Australian Government expects Japan "steadily to pursue reforms to its defence and strategic policies over the decade" and reiterates Australia's position of support for "Japan's efforts to improve its security capabilities and to play a more active role in the security of the region" (p. 41). For Australia, a more active Japan, both in terms of homeland defence and external activities, would not only contribute to a more stable regional power balance, but also strengthen the US-Japan alliance, which is critically important for Australia's security. This is why successive Australian governments, be they Labor or Liberal, have consistently supported greater security roles for Japan for decades.

This in turn suggests that Australia's closer defence and security engagement with Japan does not necessarily mean that Australia is taking an increased 'anti-China' stance. From Canberra's viewpoint, it is better to maintain good relations with China backed by a strong US military presence in the region. Security cooperation with Japan is a kind of tool used to realise such an ideal environment in which Australia does not have to 'choose' between the United States and China. This may be the reason why the terms 'semi-alliance' and 'quasi-alliance', commonly used in Japan to describe the Japan-Australia security partnership, are not so widely used by Australian policymakers. This also explains why the White Paper stresses Australia's continuous engagement with China based on the 'comprehensive strategic partnership' agreed in 2014, while being increasingly cautious about China's growing regional influence.

Some Japanese may wonder if Australia can maintain such a delicate balancing act, even if (as the White Paper itself predicts) Chinese power and influence continues to grow. With such a question in mind, the White Paper suggests that Australia's closer partnering with Indo-Pacific partners

including Japan, Indonesia, India and the Republic of Korea, as well as its continuing alliance relationship with the United States, could enable Australia to maintain a strategic advantage over China. The White Paper assumes that these regional democracies will “remain strong” even while a power-shift between the United States and China continues (p. 26). The White Paper also mentions the possibility of greater engagement not only bilaterally, but mini-laterally by working within these partnership on an ad hoc and issues-based approach.

It is not quite clear, however, that Japan could meet such an expectation. Despite Japan’s increasing presence in the Indo-Pacific, most Japanese policymakers and public are preoccupied with security issues in their immediate neighbourhood. While the Abe government has boosted Japan’s defence budget for the sixth year in a row, the budget increase has remained quite modest overall compared with those of India, South Korea and Australia, for example. Furthermore, the Abe government has lost popularity due to political scandals caused by suspicious sales of state-owned land to the private sector. It is therefore important for Australia to keep encouraging Japan’s security normalisation and its extroverted posture by publicly supporting the view that a “strong Japan” not only benefits Japanese citizens, but contributes to the stability and the prosperity of the Indo-Pacific region as a whole.

Japanese policymakers may be wary that the White Paper makes no mention of a quadrilateral grouping between the United States, Japan, Australia and India, although it stresses Australia’s continuous commitment to trilateral arrangements by the United States-Japan-Australia or India-Japan-Australia. Indeed, there has been no official response from Australia since the Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono suddenly proposed a top-level ‘Quad’ dialogue in October 2017. The Australian Labor Party, which stands a reasonable chance of winning government at the next election, bears the history of declining a place for Australia in the ‘Quad’ as proposed by Prime Minister Abe during his first term.

It remains to be seen if Japan’s proposal for a quadrilateral strategic dialogue at the ministerial level will come true in the near future. Often missed by observers, Japan views the Quad as important but only one of several means to achieve its aim of a ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’. Even if the Quad itself takes an extended time to coalesce or fails to eventuate altogether, there are many mini-lateral frameworks that will see cooperation between Japan, Australia, India and the United States. Japan, as well as Australia and India, has increased defence engagement with Indo-Pacific countries, which could provide additional opportunities to organise mini-lateral groupings with regional countries. Whether the Quad materialises or not, momentum for closer cooperation between regional (and even extra-regional) democracies is likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

In this sense, Australia's new Foreign Policy White Paper has real implications for Japan's national security policies, as well as for security cooperation between the two nations. In particular, the Indo-Pacific concept itself is likely to be the central theme of Japan's coming National Security Strategy and National Defense Program Guidelines. While the US Trump administration has also declared its 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy', it remains unclear whether such a regional strategy is consistent with its 'America first' doctrine. The task for Japan and Australia, therefore, would be not only to coordinate their common Indo-Pacific strategy, but to expand and share such a vision with other regional and extra-regional actors, including the United States, India, Southeast Asia, and European nations. The role of Japan and Australia as 'facilitators' of the liberal order in the Indo-Pacific will become even more important than ever.

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