

The changing Asia-Pacific security web

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The security text signed this week in Tokyo by John Howard and Shinzo Abe will unsettle Beijing and please Washington. Yet its long-term effects will not be so simple.

Perhaps without fully intending it, the Howard Government has created a mechanism that will eventually expand Australia's room for independent manoeuvre and leverage within the region's United States-led alliance system. That is something the Opposition may come to value. It shouldn't scare China. And it could end up making the United States' strategic life in Asia more complicated.

The Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Co-operation underlines new trust between former enemies. It endorses joint military exercises and training. It encourages greater sharing of intelligence-based assessments. And it strengthens security talks.

Importantly, it creates an annual joint meeting of foreign and defence ministers. This promises to evolve into a serious forum with the potential to co-ordinate policy, including policy shifts.

Australia can claim all these as accomplishments. Japan's security agencies have long seen the "peace constitution" as a barrier to their working with foreigners - not to mention an excuse to avoid co-operating with each other. True, change was already afoot. Abe and his predecessor, Junichiro Koizumi, have championed constitutional revision. And Japan's defence bureaucracy has been discovering the thrill of relevance. All the same, Australia has done good work in coaxing Japan to stretch its constraints.

This week's declaration is the first security agreement between Japan and any country other than the US. That does not mean an alliance between Japan and Australia is in prospect, despite some media confusion to the contrary.

On that issue, China should not worry greatly. It has seen Australia publicly equivocate over hypothetically helping the US defend Taiwan. And there are many reasons for Australia and Japan to formalise their security ties that have nothing to do with China - as our shared work on Iraq, Afghanistan, tsunami relief and the North Korean nuclear issue attest.

Still, the declaration doesn't mean business as usual. It brings a waft of new possibilities into the musty architecture of regional security. It reminds Washington's Asia-Pacific friends that they can deal directly with each other in strategic matters.

For now, of course, the Japan-Australia statement is great news for the US. No doubt it was crafted with Washington's knowledge and blessing. Naturally America would like its best friends in the Asia-Pacific region to be firm friends with each other too.

The US has been striving to draw Japan out of its anachronistic pacifist shell and to throw some of its military weight behind American global objectives. In this, closer Australia-Japan relations will help Canberra help Washington. Australia will sometimes use its new channels to reinforce US messages to Japan.

A closer relationship between Australia and Japan also dovetails with their trilateral strategic dialogue with the US. It will refine all three's convergent understandings of the strategic environment and make it easier for their forces to operate together.

Yet, a short decade or two from now, an Australia-Japan partnership might not be quite what Uncle Sam ordered.

Since the 1950s, the metaphor for Washington's defence ties in the region has been a hub and spokes - with America at the centre, and its allies mostly having little to do with each other. That vision is changing. Now we can start to imagine a web - the US remains in the middle, but new strands are spreading crossways.

One of these is the growing link between Japan and India. Asia's two chief democracies will look at the Australia-Japan declaration and negotiate their own before long. Australia should enhance its own efforts to improve defence ties with India - though there's no need to rush this, or indeed any notional quadrilateral set-up with Japan and the US, since doing so would compound any negative signals our Japan declaration has sent China.

But sooner or later, Australia needs to ensure its security links with Asia's big democracies don't run solely through the US hub. We may be Washington's closest ally in the Asia-Pacific region, but that is not the same as its most important one, here or anywhere. On top of that, the current cosiness of the alliance is no guarantee that US attention to our region won't get even more fitful.

So the Japan-Australian security declaration will have multiple uses, including as modest insurance. If the US-Australia alliance stays close, then improved Australian channels to other US friends and allies will help us get the most from it. If the US commitment to Asia wavers, then such forums will help Washington's friends present a united front in urging its renewed resolve.

Once it has matured, the new Japan-Australian defence and foreign ministers' meeting could be a potent vehicle for shaping common positions to influence US thinking. Depending on the strategic context and the world views of the governments of the day, the forum could become a platform for telling future US administrations to worry more about Asia's real security troubles - or less about its imagined ones. And for China, that might just end up being no bad thing.

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