

Japan, Australia and the changing security order in Asia by Rod Lyon

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The conclusion of the Australia–Japan security pact confirms the Asian security order is moving into a new phase. Although the pact is limited in its scope, it heralds an age when Asian great powers will be more engaged in the regional security architecture, both as players in their own right and as ‘partners’ to other regional countries. This phase of Asian security will probably take ten to twenty years to run its course. But when it has finished, the age of US hegemony in Asia will have ended. The US might well still be the strongest player, even then, but Asian security arrangements will have taken on many more of the characteristics of multipolarity.

The Australian–Japan security pact is not an alliance, although some commentators have been more than ready to describe it as such. The agreement contains no provisions for the parties to come to each other’s aid if one is attacked. The Japanese constitution means Japan cannot give that assurance. And Australia would not sign an alliance arrangement which put it so obviously in Japan’s corner in terms of the emerging Asian regional balance. Nor is the agreement intended, as the *Economist* magazine claims, as ‘a strategy of balancing China’s geopolitical reach’, at least not in the sense the authors mean.

Rather, the pact is the culmination of a multi-year effort to pull Japan more into the region as a confident and normal player. That policy rests on a particularly Huntingtonian vision of Japan. In his work *The Clash of Civilizations*, Sam Huntington depicted Japan as the smallest and loneliest of the civilizations. Although Japan ranked as a civilization in its own right, it occupied only a small geographic land-mass and had a population of only 100 million people. Moreover, Japan had no diasporas, so it had no ‘family’ in the international community.

Japan’s introvertedness makes for an insecure power. That insecurity has been heightened by years of economic underperformance, while China’s economy has been booming. And Japan’s closest ally, the United States, has become much closer to China, with US officials talking about China as a ‘responsible stakeholder’ in the global system. But even today Japan remains a major power in Asia, and its trajectory has global significance. Australia wants Japan to be a secure power in the region and not an insecure one. So the pact is meant to introduce a phase where Japan is ‘welcomed’ into the

region as a security partner. That development is important for Japan and for its neighbours. But it underlines a broader change that is afoot.

In the aftermath of World War 2, the principal structure of Asian security was the San Francisco system. That system was a series of predominantly bilateral linkages that engaged US power in the key security puzzles of Asia. ANZUS was one of those constructs. Those alliances privileged some Asian countries over their neighbours, by providing them with extended nuclear deterrence, and granting them access to advanced weapons systems, intelligence and training opportunities.

Since the end of the Cold War, two different conceptions of Asian security have been rising. The first of those suggests a multipolar arrangement, which recognises the 'rise' of two great powers never properly enmeshed within the San Franciscan system—China and India—and the increasing emergence of a more 'normal' Japan. The second conception suggests a more normative framework, within which regional countries increasingly tie their own security to regional norms and codes of behaviour. That second conception is the ASEAN Regional Framework's view of the world, where regional countries sign up to agreements like the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation.

In essence, the two competing conceptions depend on different variables: the first on power and the second on norms. The Australia–Japan pact probably suggests a greater future for the multipolar vision than for the normative one. True, the agreement draws Japan out into the region in a way that codifies and strengthens Japan's 'peaceful' role. And Australian ministers have been keen to argue that the agreement does not suggest any great-power 'balancing' role. But the agreement does support a more active Japan, more engaged with the region. It strengthens and endorses the role of one of the regional great powers, and does so at a time when all three regional great powers are feeling their way towards new relationships with each other. The pact with Australia is an implicit strengthening of Japan's regional role.

Moreover, that interpretation is the more attractive given what we know of the behaviour of the other great Asian powers. China for some years has been searching for regional 'supporters' for its own role in the region, less constrained than Japan by history and civilizational insecurities. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation was one such attempt to build China's linkages in the region, and the free trade agreements that China has been propounding are meant to remind regional states of China's growing economic clout. India is also turning its attention to the same question: what role will India play in the emerging Asian regional structure? To what extent will India be a security provider to others?

All of this brings us to the big question: what will regional security look like a decade or two from now? We should expect regional architecture over the next decade to become more reflective of the growing roles of the Asian great powers. The web of security partnerships will increasingly be characterised by the engagement of the region's emerging great powers. For many countries, the temptation will be to build new partnerships that work relatively smoothly with their existing ones. Australia should expect to be part of that development. It should expect to see its own ANZUS alliance with the United States increasingly complemented by a set of security partnerships with the regional great powers. The Australia–Japan security pact is the first formal pact off the ranks in that regard, but it will not be the last.

Because we have interests in staying engaged with all three Asian great powers, it is wrong to see Australia's security pact with Japan as some form of direct 'balancing' against one of the other great powers. The Asian security order isn't really into balance-of-power strategies yet, at least not in the sense that we have traditionally understood that term. But in Asia a different form of strategic behaviour usually takes place, which some analysts have described as 'soft balancing'. Here, nations use a range of diplomatic devices to signal their endorsement of some options and their dislike of others. So the pact is Australia's attempt to add ballast to regional stability by endorsing a greater role for a peaceful and stabilising Japan, and clearly will send its own 'soft' signals.

Of course, China and India can claim—perfectly justifiably—that they also have strong interests in regional stability. And it is important that we consider what we can do to strengthen our security partnerships with each of them. But here we press up against particular challenges. The Prime Minister has said that Chinese authoritarianism makes a security partnership between Australia and China problematic. That's true. Still, we should be looking for options to work together on those areas where our strategic interests intersect. With India the problem is more one of unfamiliarity. India wasn't part of the San Franciscan alliance system, so we never developed a sense of alliance mutuality between Canberra and New Delhi. That sense of mutuality can only develop with time, and is probably best done bilaterally. Expanding the Trilateral Security Dialogue between the US, Japan and Australia to include India would send its own 'soft' signals, most of them unhelpful ones in today's diplomatically sensitive security environment.

The coming years will require a degree of care in Australian strategic policy. Some media commentators suggest we need to rush into new commitments. We do not. The new security order in Asia will take time to develop. Moreover, Australia is an important player in this region in its own right. While regional countries will naturally focus on Japan, China and India, Australia's own part in the security order shouldn't be understated.

About the Author

Dr Rod Lyon is the Program Director, Strategy and International, with ASPI. Rod was most recently a Senior Lecturer in International Relations at the University of Queensland where he taught courses on conflict, international security, and civil-military relations. His research interests focus on a range of problems associated with global security, nuclear strategy and Australian security. He previously worked in the Strategic Analysis Branch of the Office of National Assessments between 1985 and 1996. As a Fulbright scholar in 2004, he was a visiting research fellow at Georgetown University in Washington DC, researching a project on the future of security partnerships in the post-September 11 environment. He was appointed to the National Consultative Committee on International Security Issues in April 2005.

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