
How to Be a Good Friend: China and the Australia-Japan Security Relationship

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This article examines the Howard Government's controversial March 2007 decision to sign a new Japan-Australia security agreement as a basis for examining the Chinese Government's view of Australia's East Asian security contributions in the post-Howard era. The new security pact between the two countries presents us with an excellent opportunity to examine not just prevailing assumptions in China about Australia's current security contributions in East Asia, but also how these contributions could conceivably change over the coming decade in line with the broader changes currently under-way in the strategic context of the Asia Pacific region. It argues that the new security pact with Japan needlessly emphasises the military dimension of Australia's security contributions in Asia, and, in doing so, feeds assumptions in Beijing that the Australia is on the verge of being locked-in to a US-dominated anti-China multilateral security regime in the region.

This article considers the Australian Government's recent decision to sign a new security pact with Japan as a basis for examining China's changing view of Australia's East Asian security contributions in the post-Howard era. Its purpose is to enhance our understanding of how this decision has shaped, and will likely continue to shape, official Chinese thinking on Australia as a security actor, and the parameters of interaction between China, Japan and Australia in the emerging security order of the East Asian and Asia Pacific region.

The Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation, signed between Japan and Australia in March 2007, is, at first sight, a seemingly sensible step for Australia to take toward building a sustainable 'more of the same' defence relationship with Japan in Asia. However, under closer examination, and when considering more carefully all the timings and pretexts surrounding it, a much more complicated image begins to form. Building on the premise that the Japan-China relationship as a key variable in the Australia-Japan relationship, and that it has not received sufficient attention from Australian policy makers in the lead-up to the Australia-Japan security pact, this article argues that negative thinking in China regarding the long-run geopolitical consequences of the pact—as well as the Howard Government's short-term incentives for signing it—has hardened sufficiently to significantly heighten suspicion in China that Australia and Japan are looking to progressively militarise their bilateral alliance. This has had a profound negative influence on Chinese perceptions of how Australia's interests and intentions in East

Asia in the post-Howard era could clash with China's core security interests in the region.

Following this line of inquiry, the article begins with an examination of how the new security pact might be linked in China's view to what many experts and commentators believe is Australia's long-run strategic preference for the establishment of a US-dominated multilateral alliance system, based mainly around strengthening US-Japan and Australia-Japan security ties, as *the* enduring security structure of the East Asian region. This is followed by an examination of the potentially damaging implications for Australia of the resulting widespread conviction among China's leading strategists that Australia's strengthening security ties with Japan are tantamount to an endorsement of future Japanese military build-ups under the auspices of the US-alliance system. It concludes by arguing that Australia's decision to emphasise the military dimensions of its relationship with Japan was not only strategically reckless, but also indicative of a disturbingly blinkered vision of Australia's long-term role and interest in the East Asia and Asia Pacific region. This is especially disturbing if, as it appears, the Australian Government was unaware that China's top leaders would interpret the new security pact as a major step toward the materialisation of an anti-China US-dominated strategic alignment in the region designed to severely curtail China's strategic reach in Asia and to the outside world.

Moving and Being Moved

Australia's security relationship with China is complex, evolving and closely linked to Australia's place in the international politics of Asia. Since the end of the Cold War the prevailing perception of Australia as a security actor in China has been that of a benign status quo oriented middle power with little or no enduring power as a shaper of its external security environment. The new Japan-Australia security pact represents a clean break from this general imprecise way of observing Australia as a security actor in China. This is because many of China's leading strategists believe it reflects a new found collective recognition among policy makers in Canberra that change is not an inherently bad idea, especially if it is geared towards protecting Australia's long-term security in the event of escalating strategic competition between China and the United States. While it should be emphasised that China recognises that Australia's strategic policy is currently in the midst of great flux and change from a number of different perspective's, the recently accelerated drift from pacifism to activism in Japan's national defence and security policy, this article argues, should be seen as a principal cause. As Hugh White has observed, this pact

marks a small but distinct step away from an optimistic vision of Asia's future to a darker and more pessimistic—a view of Asia divided into

mutually antagonistic camps, riven by a struggle for primacy between the U.S. and China.¹

Viewed in these terms, it is easy to see why it is becoming harder for China's strategists to see clearly the precise role Australia should and could play in shaping the future security order of East Asia. The Japan-Australia security pact, for this reason alone, presents us with an excellent opportunity to rethink how Australia's contribution to the emergence of a more assertive or 'normal' Japan is transforming China's view of what constitutes a suitable role for Australia on the international security stage.

While much has been written in recent times by security analysts in Australia on the myriad challenges posed by China's growing military power from a so-called 'hard power' or material-structural perspective, relatively little attention has been paid to the politico-strategic linkages between China's view of its own ongoing rise, the emerging East Asian regional security order, and Japan's expanding contribution to international security. This article was born therefore of what I believe is now a pressing need for Australian strategists to reconsider the perceptual dimensions of China-Japan security relations. Apart from the necessity to take stock of China's reaction to recent trends in Japan's security policy, Australia clearly needs to demonstrate a much greater awareness of the broader geopolitical implications of Japan's actions. That is to say, to strike a better balance between short-term reactionary (military-centric) policy prescription and ameliorating the long-standing historically based social and ideational tensions that profoundly influence China's views of Japan. As it stands, the latter are at best on the periphery of Australia's regional strategic policy making processes. They are also typically downplayed in Australia's bilateral security alliance with the United States. This rigid separation of material and non-material sources of potential conflict in Australia's East Asian strategic policy is imprudent and misguided for the principal reason that it downplays the root causes of current frictions between China and Japan. For this reason, before delving into how the new Japan-Australia security pact confounds and complicates China's view of Australia's role in East Asian regional security, it is worth reflecting briefly on the basic analytical frameworks that have guided China's strategic thinking on Japan as a security actor in the post-war era. These frameworks are useful in so far as they provide us with a good introductory insight into many of the underlying issues and assumptions that influence Chinese characterisations of contemporary Japan. This will be followed by a discussion on the relevance of these frameworks for Australian strategic policy, and why ideational factors will warrant much more careful consideration in Australia's bilateral relationships with both countries in the coming years. In sum, this article seeks to answer two main research and policy questions:

¹ H. White, 'Welcome to Arms', *The Diplomat*, May 2007, p. 72.

- (1) In what ways are China's concerns with respect to the new security pact linked to broader Chinese concerns about recent trends in the character and structure of the US-Japan security alliance; and
- (2) Given the strengthening security ties between Japan and Australia, what conditions and factors are from China's perspective conducive to a more stable and cooperative relationship between all three countries in the coming years.

Both questions are intended in a modest way to correct the current imbalance in Australia's strategic vision of where its security relationship with China is heading by drawing an analytical trajectory between current negative Chinese perceptions of Japan's security path, memories of Japan's wartime past in China, and how a stronger Australia-Japan security alliance could constrain China's capacity to position itself favourably in the emerging security order of the Asia Pacific region. In doing so, it aims to fashion a more comprehensive and up to date consideration of how the new Japan-Australia security pact has changed China's strategic thinking on Australia's East Asian security contributions in the post-Howard era.

Frameworks

This section outlines the general analytical frameworks that have guided Chinese thinking on Japan as a security actor since the end of the Cold War. They are; 'Japan as Inherently Militaristic', 'Japan as Innocent Victim', and 'Japan as Knowing Accomplice'. While the first framework is inherently provocative and over-simplistic, the other two are significantly more complex and warrant careful consideration here. Having said that, it is important to recognise that no one framework can do justice to the complexity of factors and issues that are currently shaping Chinese perceptions of Japan, and that each viewpoint is to a greater or lesser extent a simplification of reality. While a rush to judgment about the nature and goals of Japan as a security actor is unwise and should be avoided, these frameworks are useful in so far as they can help us identify patterns in China's strategic policy toward Japan. This provides us with a good entry point into further analysis of the Chinese Government's decision making hierarchy and the mixture of domestic and international influences that have come to bear in Chinese thinking on Japan's regional security role in recent years.

JAPAN AS INHERENTLY MILITARISTIC

Here, Japan's contemporary security strategy is positioned in the wider context of Japan's role in the violent meta-narrative of twentieth century power politics. Much of the thinking in China that falls into this category emphasised the enduring power of the deeply felt historically based enmity directed toward Japan in China. This feeling, according to this view, while obviously having a major influence on the Chinese Government's behaviour toward Japan, also perpetuates a negative image of Japan in the minds of

many Chinese people who fear that Japan is liable, if given the opportunity, to relapse into a phase of expansionist militarism comparable to that of imperial Japan prior and during the Second World War. In short, this framework focuses on the militaristic “dark side” of Japan and gives narrow and particular meaning to representations of the past.²

Proponents of this general way of observing Japan as a security actor in China point out that no other foreign power has done more harm to China than Japan and cite the 1904-05 Russo-Japanese War (fought mainly in Northeast China), the Boxer rebellion—in which Japanese troops made up about one-third of the allied force that attacked Beijing—and Japan’s 1931 invasion and occupation of Northeast China, as evidence to support this claim. Some also point to the cultural traditions of celebrating the martial spirit in Japan, as exemplified by admiration for the Samurai and the Code of Bushido, to justify their view that Japan is inherently war-prone. Most security scholars who have a tendency to gravitate toward this view of Japan in China speak of Japan as a potential great power and believe that the post-war era of a militarily and politically weak Japan is coming to an end. This view also tends toward the identification of a trajectory between the historical animosity that shapes Chinese perceptions of Japan as a security actor and the antagonistic logic of a militarily strong Japan operating under the aegis of the US-brokered system of defensive alliances in Asia.³

JAPAN AS INNOCENT VICTIM

This framework characterises Japan as almost entirely dependent on the security guarantees of the United States. It argues that Japan’s post-war security strategy has always been reflexive of America’s strategic interests in Asia (not Japan’s), and that this general dynamic is also reflected in recent US-led efforts to broaden Japan’s international security role—the new Japan-Australia security pact included. According to this view, in the realm of security Japan is essentially a puppet-state that has no choice other than to comply with the short and long-term strategic goals of the United States. Moreover, because of this, it is argued, Japan has no means to breakout of what has become a deeply entrenched ‘victim’ mentality in their defence and security policy.

Proponents of this view in China often point out that even without a direct military contribution from Japan, US-Japan military cooperation is nothing new. Since its defeat in the Pacific theatre of the Second World War the United States, it is argued, has strongly encouraged Japan to play a sub-imperial role in the US alliance system. This was evident during the Cold War for example when the United States—at a time when it was becoming increasingly preoccupied with the Soviet threat—asked for Japanese

² D. McCargo, *Contemporary Japan* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), p. 3.

³ T. Christensen, ‘China and the U.S.-Japan Alliance, and the Security Dilemma in East Asia,’ *International Security*, vol. 23, no. 4, (1999), pp. 49-80.

assistance to help monitor instability on the Korean peninsula despite the fact the United States was already there in force. The basic contention here is that the uneven distribution of 'hard power' between Japan and the United States means that US policy makers have de-facto control over the scope and direction of Japan's national defence and security policy. This control extends not only to Japan's future role in the US alliance system, but also the parameters of interaction between Japan and Australia. Put bluntly, according to this view, Japan still cannot say 'no' to the United States.

JAPAN AS KNOWING ACCOMPLICE

Here Japan is portrayed as a 'knowing accomplice' of US strategic policy in East Asia that is tentatively complying with US demands but as much as possible seeking to avoid direct involvement in US-led military affairs. According to this view Japan is willing to comply with US demands only when it advances its own domestic and foreign policy goals.⁴ Prompted partly by the North Korean nuclear crisis and partly by Japan's Liberal Democratic Party's reform agenda, according to this framework, Japanese strategists are desperately looking for new ways to develop a more robust defence force. This, in the eyes of many of China's leading strategists, reflects a groundswell of support among security policy-makers in Tokyo for the revision of Article 9 of Japan's post-war constitution.⁵ This troubles China because Article 9 negates the need for Japanese force projection (offensive) capabilities and is fundamental to Chinese understanding's of Japan 'passive' post-war foreign policy.⁶

As previously mentioned, proponents of this framework tend to believe Japan's leaders are willingly allowing the United States to lock Japan into a position of long-term strategic antagonism with China. Of relevance here is the work of East Asian security scholar Rex Li. Li argues that the 'Japan-US Joint Declaration on Security Alliance for the Twenty First Century', drafted under President Clinton and Prime Minister Hashimoto, was the start of Japan's now accelerated transition from economic power to political power.⁷ Importantly, according to this view Japan's leaders are now much less tentative in promoting Japan's own national security interests, regardless of domestic pressures to do otherwise. From China's perspective, this indicates a 'coming of age' for Japan's new-generation leaders, many of whom have strong conservative tendencies and have published books that advocate the revision of the constitution and the virtues of strengthening US-

⁴ R. Tanter, 'With Eyes Wide Shut: Japan, Heisei Militarisation, and the Bush Doctrine', in P. Van Ness and M. Gurtov (eds.), *Confronting the Bush Doctrine: Critical Views from the Asia Pacific* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 3.

⁵ F. Fukuyama, 'Re-Envisioning Asia', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 84, no. 1, (2005), p. 81.

⁶ K. Cooney, *Japan's Foreign Policy Maturation: a Quest for Normalcy* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 50.

⁷ R. Li, 'Partners or Rivals: Chinese Perceptions of Japan's Security Strategy in the Asia Pacific Region', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 22, no. 4, (1999), p. 14.

Japan military coordination.⁸ This new generation of policy-makers are also, according to this view, much less restrained by a sense of historical burden or traditional party or factional allegiance.

In sum, according to this framework the hesitancy of the 'old-guard' in Japan has been replaced by a renewed commitment to overcome the 'victim' mentality and become 'normal'. That is not to say, however, that such individuals believe that any military expansion or constitutional reform should not be tempered with a great deal of caution and managed in such a way as to not provoke open hostility from China and other countries in the region. This framework is popular among those Chinese strategists who have long believed that the recently recast US-Japan security alliance is primarily geared towards fostering the growth of Japan's military.⁹ Of the three frameworks, this is in my view the one most closely aligned with current trends in China's strategic thinking on Japan and its strengthening security ties with Australia.

Chinese Popular Views of Japan's Strategic Trends

At the popular level in China, anti-Japanese sentiment is on the rise. In a public opinion poll conducted in China in 2002 only 5.9% of those interviewed said that Japan was 'very friendly' or 'friendly', while 43.3% said the opposite.¹⁰

In August 2003 one million signatures were gathered on a petition to the Japanese Government to resolve the chemical weapons issue involving the death of one and injury of many others caused by the uncovering of drums of mustard gas in Northeast China, left over from the time of Japanese occupation.¹¹

This trend toward negativity in popular Chinese thinking on Japan is becoming an increasingly influential factor in the shaping of official Chinese thinking on Japan as a security actor. As Fewsmith and Rosen point out:

a case can now be made that public opinion as that term is usually understood has begun to play a role, albeit one that remains restricted and significant under certain conditions.¹²

The point to emphasise here is that popular historically based animosity is closely linked to the domestic legitimacy of the fourth generation Chinese

⁸ Ibid., p. 15.

⁹ Christensen, p. 62.

¹⁰ N. Li, 'Why Does China Treat ASEAN and Japan Differently?', *Working Paper* (Singapore: Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University, 2006), pp. 17-18.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 18

¹² D. Lampton, 'China's Foreign and National Security Policy Making Processes: Is it Changing and Does it Matter', in D. Lampton (ed.), *The Making of Chinese Foreign and Security Policy in the Era of Reform* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 1-39.

leadership. Accordingly, and because President Hu lacks much of the revolutionary zeal of Mao and Deng, his leadership group have sought legitimacy through the popular aspirations of the Chinese people. This is important to recognise from Australia's perspective because it helps explain why China's leaders do not want to be seen as being weak in the face of 'Japanese provocation' or leaders who appear to be unrepentant about Japan's past aggressions.

A process of interaction between historic, domestic and external forces shapes Chinese perceptions of Japan as a security actor. The recent upsurge in anti-Japanese sentiment in China is partly attributable to the changing domestic and social dynamics in both countries. This is important for Australian strategists to recognise, especially those who believe that the widespread hurt many Chinese feel at Japanese actions in the 1930s and 1940s has been manufactured by China's modern political strategists for the purpose of reinforcing popular nationalism and state interests. Although nationalism is used as a propaganda tool to shape popular perceptions of Japan in China, this kind of thinking is ultimately misguided because it diverts our attention away from the enduring role history and genuine feeling play in shaping popular Chinese perceptions of the balance of power in East Asia.¹³

After the normalisation of China-Japan relations in 1972, the two countries interacted in terms of what is commonly known as the 'friendship diplomacy' framework—based on the Peace and Friendship Treaty of 1978.¹⁴ This treaty reinforced an accommodating attitude toward China motivated by Japanese guilt about past aggression in Tokyo, the basic idea being that while Japan was cordial, if not obsequious, in its dealings with Beijing, China would be accepting of Japan's security alliance with the United States—which at the time was viewed as a useful means to prevent Japanese remilitarisation. This view in China has changed as Japanese policy makers have become less interested in accommodating China out of fear of reviving popular Chinese anti-Japanese feeling in recent years. This has fundamentally changed the politico-strategic dynamics of East Asia and the parameters of China–Japan–Australia interactions. Over the last two decades Japan's Self-Defence Force's (SDF) have steadily expanded their activities. This has reflected Japanese desire to see the SDF accepted domestically and internationally as a legitimate national military, As Junichiro Koizumi remarked in April 2004: "to the eyes of anyone outside the country, the SDF are an army ... several points of the constitution are not quite

¹³ S. Jager, *The Politics of Identity: History, Nationalism, and the Prospect for Peace in Post-Cold War East Asia* (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2007).

¹⁴ M. Mochizuki, 'China-Japan Relations: Downward Spiral or New Equilibrium?', in D. Shambaugh (ed.), *Power Shift: China and Asia's New Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 135-150.

logical in the light of common sense.”¹⁵ As far back as 1976, Japanese defence policy was redefined in the National Defence Program Outline to include the principle of gradual and progressive improvement in Japan’s defence capabilities up to a level that would allow the SDF to carry out two tasks: surveillance during peacetime, and the force-level capacity to deal with limited acts of aggression.¹⁶ To Chinese strategists, these trends—combined with Japan’s massive latent capacity for military force projection—makes the characterisation of Japan as a ‘pacifist power’ difficult to swallow—especially in the eyes of those who have long believed that Japan is looking for any possible means to nudge the margins of self defence and improve the capabilities of the SDF to operate outside Japan.

The post-September 11 Security Environment Rationale

One of the notable changes in the post-September 11 international security environment is that one hears more labels such as ‘allies’, ‘partners’, ‘competitors’ and ‘rivals’ to describe the external relations of states. This discourse has provided a new forum for the United States and its allies to express concern about the nature of China’s strategy as a rising power as it moves from an insular state to one that is seeking a more prominent role in world affairs. This deep-seated concern at the diplomatic and foreign policy making level in Japan and the United States since September 11 has added legitimacy to the views of Chinese analysts and strategists who have long suspected a conspiratorial anti-China link between Japanese support for the US-Japan security alliance and America’s planning preferences for the military expansion of the Japanese state. For this reason, Japan’s renewed assertiveness post-September 11 was never, in China’s strategic thinking, confined to meeting the need to fight the US-led Global War on Terror (GWOT). Rather, it was and is viewed as a symptom of much deeper changes in Japan’s security policy and Japan’s identity as a ‘normalising’ international actor.¹⁷

This explains in part why Chinese analysts fear that the vaguely worded promises contained in the new Japan-Australia security pact concerning cooperation over ‘counter proliferation of weapons of mass destruction’ and ‘counter terrorism’ have been worded this way so as to be stretched to cover almost any contingency. Viewed in these terms, Japan, and to a lesser but nonetheless significant extent, Australia, have by signing the agreement made a choice between being viewed by China as diplomatically aloof ‘middle powers’ and being appreciated for their close security affinities with the United States. Context and presentation are all important here. The Japan-Australia security pact sends a clear message to China—intentional

¹⁵ D. Roy, ‘The Sources and Limits of Sino-Japanese Tensions’, *Survival*, vol. 47, no. 2 (2005), pp. 191-214.

¹⁶ McCargo, p. 183.

¹⁷ Z. Zhu, *U.S.-China Relations in the 21st Century: Power Transition and Peace* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 91.

or not—about what kind of relationship Australia wants with Japan. The pact, in China's view, prefigures the militarisation of Australian foreign policy—much the same way Japan's logistical contribution to the GWOT in 2003 prefigured the expansion of Japan's military budgets, the upgrading of Japan's military force structure capabilities, and future deployment of Japanese military forces abroad.¹⁸ It also prefigures that future Australian governments will swing away from the view that economic interdependence is the best means to ensure Australia's security in the Asian region. All this makes it sensible from China's view to believe that Australia believes its long-run security interests are best served by taking steps now to assist Japan to become a 'normal' country with a fully functioning military and renewed commitment to taking a hard-line to defend Japan's national interests.

Conclusion

While it is important to differentiate between strategies and actual policy practices, the new Japan-Australia security pact has, in China's view, established a strategic and political pretext for Australia to support the use of force to resolve international disputes in East Asia and surrounding areas in the coming years. This, on top of recent changes in the character and structure of the US-Japan security alliance, has dramatically ratcheted-up suspicion in China about what Australia's role in the emerging East Asian security order will be. This perception has complicated the prospects for a successful resolution on many of the long-standing issues between China and Japan. Upon retiring as US special assistant on national security in 2006, East Asia security specialist Michael Green observed that the Japan-China relationship is

one of the most unusual, schizophrenic relationships in history because of the way trade was booming between the two countries but military rivalry was growing out of control.¹⁹

While it is not known whether Japan has past the point of no return in terms of breaking with its pacifist traditions, or whether or not the so-called 'normalisers' have taken full control of Japan's security policy, it is clear that great changes are underway.

Although space constraints preclude a closer examination here of the precise role Chinese behaviour and policies play in the joint declaration itself, this article has sought to demonstrate in an overarching way how China's bilateral security relationship with Japan has changed, and could change, as a result of the new Japan-Australia security pact, and why their multifaceted and fragile relationship warrants more careful consideration

¹⁸ Tanter, p. 18.

¹⁹ G. Earl, 'Signs of Change as Asian Giants Meet', *The Australian Financial Review*, 8 February 2006, p. 17.

from Australia's strategic perspective. In juxtaposing the long-standing historically based issues between the two countries with China's recent displeasure over the Australia-Japan security pact, this article has sought to illustrate why it is important for Australian strategists to develop a more nuanced way of thinking about the potential consequences for Australia of Japan assuming a more prominent role on the international security stage. This requires a broad politico-strategic perspective; one that provides an enhanced basis for balancing what has changed with what remains unchanged in a region that is now more important to Australia's security than ever before.

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