

Report

Japanese-Australian Relations

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A Japanese submarine is seen from the port hole of the destroyer ship, in Zambales province, Philippines, April 2016 [EPA]

Abstract

How were Japan and Australia able to resolve the historical legacy of military conflict of WWII? How can we explain the rapidly improving relations between these two Pacific Ocean powers? What is the role of the two elephants in the room, China and the United States, in understanding the post-WWII bilateral relations between Australia and Japan? As this report will demonstrate, the answers lie in geopolitics, the Cold War, and Liberal International World Order.

Introduction

During the Second World War, at the end of May 1942, three Japanese Type A midget submarines attacked the Sydney Harbour, with the intent of destroying Allied warships. Despite being unsuccessful in sinking the heavy cruiser USS Chicago, it ended up destroying the depot ship HMAS Kuttubul instead, killing nineteen Australian and two British members. All six of the Japanese crew members died in attempting to carry out this mission. Between February 1942 and November 1943, Japanese air force conducted a total of thirty-three air raids in Northern Australia, in particular, focusing on Darwin to prevent Australian bases being used to contest the Japanese conquest of the Dutch East Indies (present day Indonesia). From 1942 till the Japanese surrender, Japanese and Australian forces were locked in a brutal conflict in Papua New Guinea.

In 2016, over seven decades after the end of the war, the Japanese Ministry of Defense has recently announced it would conduct joint military exercises with Australia with Japan's most advanced attack submarine, the Soryu, in an attempt to win a lucrative Australian defense contract.⁽¹⁾ Since the signing of the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation in 2007, during Shinzo Abe's first stint as Japanese Prime Minister, along

with “bilateral information sharing and cooperation in defence technology, space and cyberspace”, Japanese and Australian militaries have also conducted regular bilateral and trilateral “combat operations, anti-submarine warfare and tactical manoeuvres.”(2)

Establishing trade and intelligence sharing during the Cold War

The memories of the bitter conflict during the Second World War were still raw when the United States and Japan were negotiating the United States-Japan Security Treaty in 1951. In a news article dated four days prior to the signing of the treaty on September 8th, the Australian Associated Press reported that the “Australian and New Zealand are known to have urged” the United States for more specific wording on restricting Japanese ability to “rebuild their armed forces.”(3) The US Ministry of Defense were eager to leave the option open for Japan, at some point, to have a military force in case the Soviet Union were to expand its sphere of influence in East and South East Asia.

Despite Australian reservations however, even from the early years of the Cold War, in the 1950s and 1960s, Japan and Australia gradually developed security cooperation, focusing primarily on intelligence exchange. As Yusuke Ishihara rightly points out, this cooperation was driven by “a combination of multiple factors, among which were Australia’s concerns over Southeast Asia, in particular the “confrontation” of Sukarno regime in Indonesia”.(4) The example of Japanese and Australian mutual “concerns” over Indonesia illustrates the importance of Cold War allegiances of both Japan and Australia in the post-WWII era relations.

Aside from improving security relations, trade and commerce were an important aspect of Cold War relations Japan and Australia and they signed a commerce treaty in 1957, with Australia becoming the first country outside the United States to have done so. Alan Rix argues that the negotiation of the “Commerce Agreement and its revision cemented the economic base to a growing political friendship, and confirmed in the minds of many in both governments that the two countries could work together effectively at an official and political level.”(5) From the early 1960s until relatively recently in 2007, when China took over the mantle, Japan was Australia’s largest trading partner.

Post Cold-War Relations

The end of the Cold War brought about both opportunities and challenges for regional powers in the Asia-Pacific. While the winding-down of the Cold War brought about a decreasing military presence of Soviet military in the region and “normalization of USSR-China relations in 1989”, it also “reactivated a series of bilateral and multilateral disputes between states of East Asia which previously had been suppressed under the weight of their competing military blocs during the Cold War.”(6) Barry Buzan and Gerald Segall argue that the United States helped fuel an arms race in the region, citing the rapid growth in defense budgets of China and Japan in the early 1990s, by “creating a power

vacuum instead of establishing a structure of arms control or collective security.”(7) The absence of robust regional institutions, differing political and economic systems, and historical enmities, due in large measure to the Cold War bipolarization, meant difficulty in mediating disputes and alleviating security dilemmas.(8) Aside from the swelling military budgets, North Korean missile test (1993) and crisis in the Taiwan Straits (1996) highlighted the growing tensions.

Outside of the regional security relations, it is impossible to understand Japanese-Australian relations without examining their relationship with the United States. In Japan’s case, strengthening, or reaffirming, relations with the United States in this regional security climate, in the 1990s, was seen as crucial for policy-makers. Despite an evolution in Japan’s ability to establish a high-tech, modern military, in many ways, Japan remains dependent on the U.S. for its security and takes its lead when it comes to foreign policy from post WWII until today. While Japan looked for concrete reassurances in US’s commitment to Japan’s security after the end of the Cold War, the US expected Japan to go beyond financing international organizations and play a more active role in international peacekeeping operations and to maintain security in the region. In brief, the United States expected Japan to “burden share.”

While the post-WWII era can be seen as an important period of gradual improvement in relations, primarily in the area of trade and intelligence sharing, it was from the 1990s that Japan and Australia began to develop an “impressive record of active cooperation...in a wide range of areas”(9), in particular, in international peacekeeping operations.

Japan-Australia relations: in the Chinese shadow?

While it is clear that Japanese relations with Australia- economic, diplomatic, and security- have developed from the post-WWII era through shared interests and their loyalty to the liberal international order, it is important to understand how China figures in this burgeoning relationship. What, if any, role has the reemergence of China as a regional power played over the past decade or so? Can we see strengthening security relations between Japan and Australia as a direct response to China? Where is there commonality between Australia and Japan and where do they differ?

One way theorists have attempted to understand this idea is through conceptualizing it as ‘hedging.’ Hedging is an increasingly popular way of understanding security relations in contemporary Asia-Pacific, particularly with regards to Chinese-US strategies. Evan Medeiros explains the concept of hedging with regards to the United States and China as, “on one hand, stress engagement and integration mechanisms and, on the other, emphasize realist-style balancing in the form of external security cooperation with Asian states and national military modernization programs.”(10) Evelyn Goh, on the other

hand, defines hedging differently and argues that it is not a good way to categorize US-China relations, as hedging is a policy for non-hegemonic powers who use indirect balancing alongside engagement. For Goh, hedging is a "a set of strategies aimed at avoiding (or planning for contingencies in) a situation in which states cannot decide upon more straightforward alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality. Instead they cultivate a middle position that forestalls or avoids having to choose one side [or one straightforward policy stance] at the obvious expense of another." (11) Can we apply this theory to understand Australia-Japan 'alliance' vis-à-vis China?

Japan is currently vying for a lucrative Australian submarine contract with German and French companies and Hugh White, among others, have argued that "Japan seems to expect something close to a full-blown alliance, directed against China, under which Japan would be assured of Australia's support, including military support, in a crisis." (12) This idea is particularly popular notion, especially, in light of Japan's reinterpretation of Article 9 of its constitution which lifts restrictions on the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to militarily assist its partners in situations deemed to directly threaten the state. Chinese officials have certainly made their opposition to the Japanese bid, and their uncomfortableness with the developments in the relationship. The Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, told journalists in a joint press conference with his Australian counterpart Julie Bishop that hopes that in "military cooperation with Japan, Australia will take into full account this historical context and take into consideration also the feelings of Asian countries because of that history," and went onto state that they "hope that Australia will take concrete actions to support the peaceful development of Japan and Japan's efforts to uphold its pacifist constitution and not the opposite." (13)

While the general consensus seems to be that Japan is pushing to cement a strong security alliance with Australia vis-à-vis China, it is unclear whether Australia is in agreement over such moves. There is certainly a lot of convergence and shared perspectives between the Australian and Japanese foreign policy outlook, there are also some key differences. As Ishihara rightly points out, "given geographic proximity and long standing issues in their bilateral relations, Japan has a much more acute sense of risks about China" (14) and that while Japan and Australia both pursue a policy of engagement and hedging with China, unsurprisingly, Australia has been far more successful doing so in its diplomatic relations with China. For Ishihara, this contrast means that given "Japan faces a number of risks derived from the rise of China, while Australia can afford far more stable relations." (15)

Given the importance of China to Australia with regards to trade and investment, the submarine deal has been an important and contested debate in Australia. Should Australia accept the Japanese bid? What are the implications of Japan winning the contract? For Hugh White the costs are not outweighed by the benefit. For White, the

French and German bids are less complicated, and that if Japan wins the bid, "China will not be deterred by any messages we send through buying submarines and building an alliance with Japan. Instead, it will keep claiming more political and strategic weight in Asia, and tensions will keep rising."(16) For many, despite Chinese opposition, Japan remains a favorite to get the contract.

As we can see, rising Chinese power in the region is a key factor in understanding the context for Australian-Japanese relations. What about the regional and global hegemon?

The United States and Trilateralism

Looking at Japan-Australia relations through a strictly bilateral lens ignores the significance of the United States to their foreign policy. Tomohiko Satake examines the development of trilateralism between Australia, Japan and the US in the 1990s, after the end of the Cold War. The origins lie in the early 1990s when "both Tokyo and Canberra reshaped their alliance relations with the United States and expanded their regional security role."(17) As in, both Japan and Australia developed alliance relations in this period that went beyond security of their borders. An example of US-Australian collaboration in the Asia-Pacific can be seen with Australia was eager for the United States to get involved in aiding East Timor's self-determination in 1999, for instance. While Australia did not get exactly what they wanted, American troops on the ground, the US did provide intelligence and logistical support. Australia clearly saw this as an alliance issue. The developing trilateralism can be seen, for instance, in the fact that Japanese joint military activities with Australia often overlapped with their bilateral agreements with the United States. Furthermore, in the Partnership Agenda between Japan and Australia, announced in 1997 which laid out the breadth of joint activities the two would be involved in regionally and globally like arms control, peacekeeping and counter-terrorism, it "also recognized that both Japan and Australia needed to work together in order to 'sustain the United States' important regional role."(18) Therefore, Satake concludes, that considering the "strategic interdependence between the United States, Japan, and Australia, it was quite natural that their respective dyad relations evolved into 'trilateralism' afterward."(19)

Conclusion

This report shows the evolution of the development of strong bilateral relations between Australia and Japan. Some would argue that this is not surprising since the end of the Second World War with their shared interest in maintaining US presence in the region and the status-quo of the liberal international order. All of these are in the context of the rise of China as a regional military and economic power. While this is all clear, it should be noted that China remains an important trading partner for the US, Japan and Australia, and Australia has been successful in maintaining strong diplomatic relations with China. Even with regards to Japanese-Chinese relations, despite the recent growing

tensions in the East China Sea, observers tend to note that things are not as bad as they often seem from the outside. Aside from all these caveats, we should also note that, as history often shows, not only is there always contingency, there are also other ways to imagine what the world can look like. In the Japanese case, for instance, the historic victory of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) in 2009 tried to implement an alternative vision of Japanese domestic policy and, more crucially for this paper, to establish a more “equal” relationship with the US and closer ties with important regional actors, especially China and South Korea. One could argue this vision included Australia as part of the “regional actors” as Japan strengthened ties with Australia during the short-lived reign of the DPJ.

While it is important to mull over the “what could have been” if the DPJ was successful in staying in power and implementing their vision, the central issue, however, remains how the United States aims to deal with rising Chinese power. Hegemonic powers tend not to want to disturb the status-quo and the general consensus seems to be reflected in the words of the International Relations theorist John Ikenberry. Ikenberry writes that even after imagining the perfect global socioeconomic system behind the Rawlsian “veil of ignorance,” we would, or more precisely, should, see the liberal order. Therefore, for Ikenberry, the task is to “make [the liberal order] so expansive and so institutionalized that China has no choice but to become a full-fledged member of it.”⁽²⁰⁾ As the rise of China as a regional and global power may continue to be a geopolitical reality in future, it is hard to imagine how tensions in the region will remain unresolved with a lack of policy makers in the United States seriously engaging China and the rest of the world in imagining and alternative global order.

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