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STRENGTHENING SECURITY

COOPERATION WITH AUSTRALIA:

A NEW SECURITY MEANS FOR JAPAN

Yoshinobu Yamamoto

In March 2007, the prime ministers of Japan and Australia, Shinzo Abe and John Howard, issued a joint declaration to expand bilateral security cooperation. The declaration plays up close security relations on the basis of shared democratic values. It says that "Japan and Australia will deepen and expand their bilateral cooperation in the areas of security and international peace and security, as well as human security." The scope of security cooperation includes many areas such as transnational crime, counter-terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, peace operations, and human security. This marks the first time that Japan has forged such close security relations with a country other than the United States.

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Japan's security cooperation with Australia has been evolving over the past two to three years. The most notable is the fact that the Japanese troops deployed to the southern Iraqi city of Samawah in the wake of the 2003 Iraq war to engage in reconstruction work were protected by Australian troops. In March 2006, the two countries inaugurated a foreign minister-level tripartite strategic dialogue together with the United States. Since then, bilateral security cooperation between Japan and Australia has been evolving alongside tripartite security cooperation, leading to the first summit meeting among the three countries held on the sidelines of the APEC summit in September 2007. From the perspective of the United States, which has maintained strong alliances with both Japan and Australia, recently expanded Japan-Australia security cooperation may appear to complement the "hub-and-spokes" alliance system in the Asia-Pacific region. The strengthening of bilateral security relations has merits for Japan and Australia, of course, but it does not end there.

Firstly, bilateral cooperation would contribute to providing regional and international public goods. Cooperation between the two highly developed maritime powers, in tandem with the United States, will contribute to maritime and aviation security in the Asia-Pacific region. Japan and Australia have also agreed to cooperate in tackling non-traditional security threats such as natural disasters and pandemics. By jointly promoting a multilateral framework for energy and environmental cooperation, they will be able to help the region maintain open regionalism as well.


Secondly, bilateral cooperation would contribute to maintaining and promoting democracy and human rights in the region. Now that democracy and human rights have come to be accepted as universal values in many parts of the world, it is appropriate for Japan and Australia as well as the United States to make these liberal values the basis for security and other cooperation as stated in the joint declaration; nonetheless, they should be very careful in how they promote such values. By reflecting these liberal norms in its international policies and cooperation

and committing to these values, Japan would demonstrate to other countries in the region that it will never go back to its non-democratic past.

Thirdly, security cooperation between Japan and Australia, as well as the United States, would function as a collective hedge vis-à-vis a rising China. This is the trickiest part of deepening bilateral security ties. Given the firm US-Japan and US-Australia alliances, strengthening security cooperation between the US' closest allies might be perceived as forming a quasi-triple alliance against China. Indeed, China is very skeptical about the purpose and intent of bilateral and trilateral security cooperation lest they target China. However, what the three countries are doing is preparing for uncertainties in the future direction of China's security and defense policies. China may take similar measures in response since the future behavior of these three countries may appear equally uncertain in its eyes. Such mutual hedging may result in creating a situation with China on one side and Japan, Australia and the United States on the other, with all of them trying to promote close economic relations bilaterally and multilaterally at the same time. Cautious behavior toward other countries is not unusual, particularly in a rapidly changing balance of power game. However, we have to remember that the currently evolving security cooperation between Japan and Australia (and the United States) is embedded within larger cooperative security and economic frameworks in the Asia-Pacific region such as the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the East Asian Summit and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).

Fourthly, the new security agreement would open up new security measures to Japan. Japan-Australia security cooperation, as it now stands, is not a defense pact but rather an entente in the sense that the two countries are to consult closely on security matters and cooperate with regard to various international and regional public goods. Such bilateral security cooperation is not intended to establish a highly regularized security alliance similar to the one between Japan and the United States or NATO. On the other hand, it is different from an ad hoc coalition of the willing formed to solve a particular problem and dissolved upon solution of the

problem. Security cooperation between Japan and Australia will sit somewhere between an institutionalized alliance and a coalition of the willing. It will provide Japan with a new means of ensuring international security in a rapidly globalizing world.

It was the leadership of conservative leaders – Japanese Prime Ministers Junichiro Koizumi and Shinzo Abe, Australian Prime Minister John Howard and US President George W. Bush – that accelerated security cooperation between Japan, Australia and the United States in the post-9/11 environment. Conditions are now changing. In Japan, for example, Mr. Abe, who made “value-oriented diplomacy” a slogan for his foreign policies and pushed for closer security cooperation with Australia, has stepped down due to health problems. Political enthusiasm and drive for enhancing security cooperation on the basis of democratic values may have dissipated for the moment, but Japan and Australia should continue to enhance their security cooperation in a way that serves the good of the region and the world. 

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