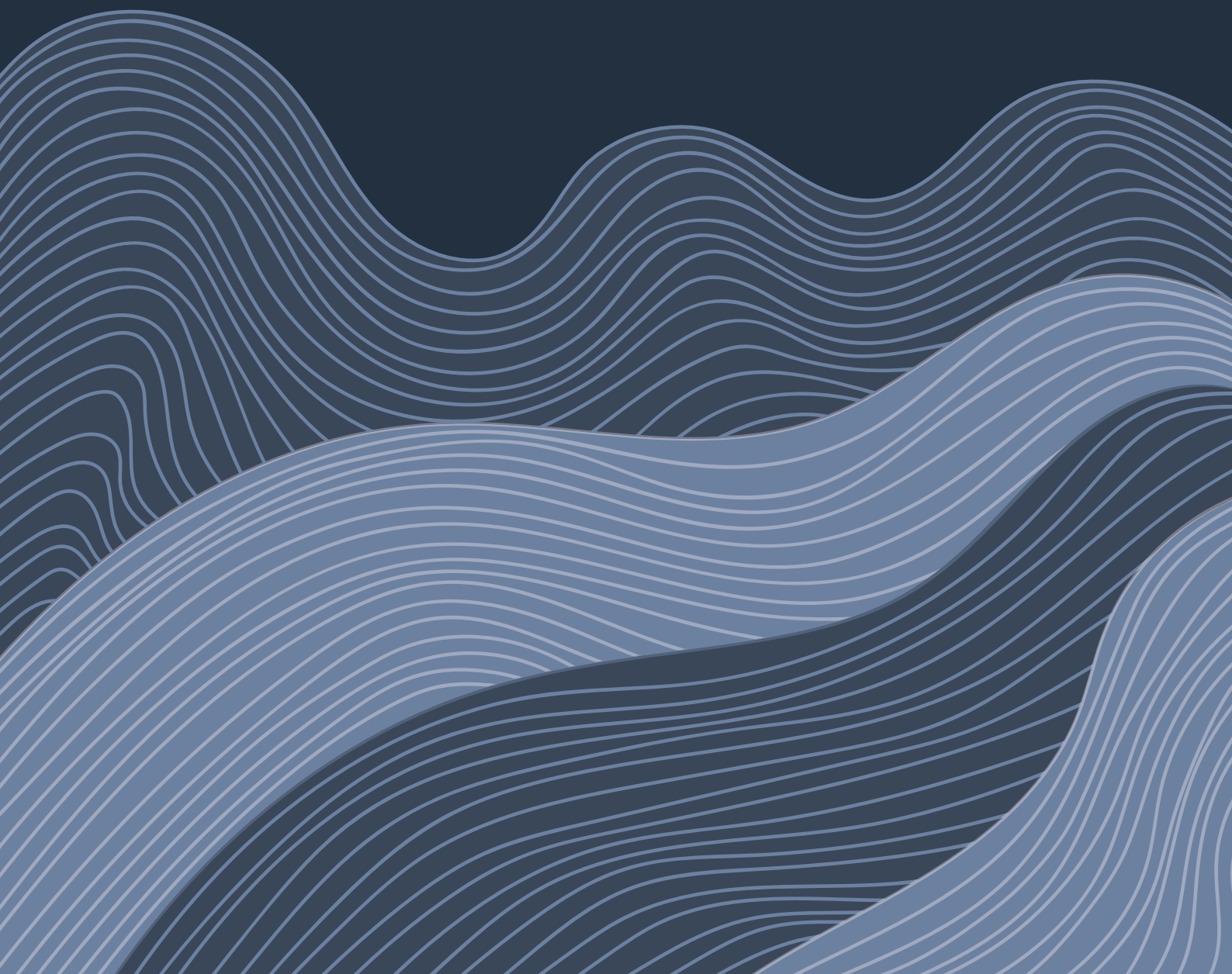
UNITED STATES STUDIES CENTRE

JAPANFOUNDATION 国際交流基金

Maritime security strategies for Japan and Australia

Report of the inaugural JADE Fellows

JUNE 2025



UNITED STATES STUDIES CENTRE

The United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney is a university-based research centre, dedicated to the rigorous analysis of American foreign policy, economic security, emerging technology, politics, society and culture. The Centre is a national resource, that builds awareness of the dynamics shaping America, their implications for Australia — and critically — solutions for the Alliance.

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The Japan Foundation is Japan's only institution dedicated to carrying out comprehensive international cultural exchange programs. Through its three main areas of focus — arts and cultural exchange, Japanese language education overseas, and Japanese studies and global partnerships programs, the Japan Foundation creates opportunities to foster friendship, trust and mutual understanding between Japan and other countries and regions.

Table of contents

Foreword

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We are pleased to present this first collection of publications under the Japan-Australia Dialogue and Exchange (JADE) for the Next Generation initiative, a collaboration between the United States Studies Centre and The Japan Foundation.

This publication arrives at an important moment for the bilateral relationship, for deepening Australia-Japan strategic cooperation has become an increasingly important pursuit for both countries. Beginning with the 2007 Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation (JDSC) and reflected in the elevation of the relationship to a Special Strategic Partnership in 2014 and the issuing of an updated JDSC in 2022, the two countries have taken their relationship from strength to strength. Such has been the success of these efforts that Australia and Japan now regard one another as their most important strategic partner after the United States.

Yet sustaining that momentum over the long term will require building a deeper mutual understanding between the political and strategic communities in both countries. The success of those efforts will rest largely on strengthening people-to-people ties, and particularly building lasting connections between emerging Australian and Japanese thought leaders who will carry the relationship forward in the coming decades. However, compared with the breadth of scholarship and depth of connections between the policy and intellectual communities in the US-Japan and US-Australia alliances, respectively, those that undergird the Special Strategic Partnership between Australia and Japan are comparatively underdeveloped. Building out this knowledge foundation will be essential for the bilateral relationship to live up to the ever-expanding role that both countries see for it in their national strategies.

It is in that spirit that the USSC and the Japan Foundation established the JADE Program in 2024. This initiative seeks to strengthen the intellectual infrastructure undergirding the Australia-Japan relationship, and to bridge the gap between the two countries' strategic policy communities and their robust cultural, business and area studies communities. It does so through connecting and empowering emerging academic, industry and policy talent from both countries, positioning them to make meaningful contributions to an increasingly intimate partnership between two of the Indo-Pacific's most influential and important democratic powers.

This first collection of JADE Fellow publications — focused on issues relating to maritime security in the Indo-Pacific — is more than a simple reflection of the successful outcomes of the initiative's first year. It is a testament both to the policy talent of a new cohort of thought leaders from across the academic, business and government communities in Australia and Japan, and to the deep and enduring interest that the next generation has in strengthening the intellectual foundations of this important bilateral relationship.

If the exemplary work of this initial cohort of JADE Fellows is anything to go by, then the future of the Australia-Japan strategic partnership is in great hands. The United States Studies Centre looks forward to continuing to work with the Japan Foundation and future JADE cohorts in support of that important mission.

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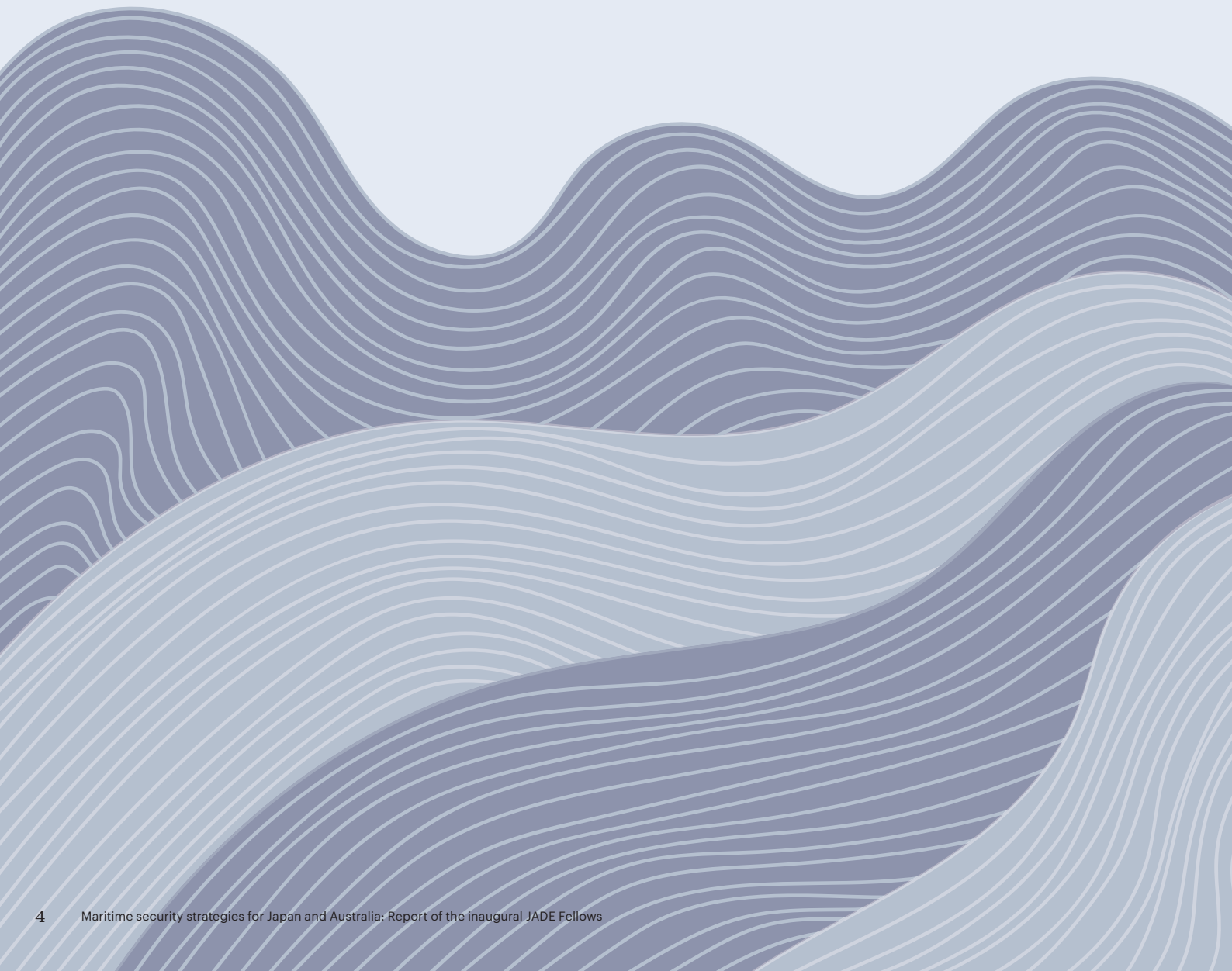
SECTION ONE

Regional security and deterrence



Closing the gap: Envisioning greater bilateral coordination between Japan and Australia in response to escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula

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Executive summary

- The security situation on the Korean Peninsula has deteriorated significantly over the past year with North Korea's signing of a 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership' with Russia, the deployment of North Korean troops to Ukraine and Pyongyang's increasingly aggressive posture towards South Korea.[1]
- Japan and Australia have been watching the escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula with growing concern, given their shared interest in curbing North Korea's nuclear weapons program.
- However, Tokyo and Canberra still hold different views as to where the Korean Peninsula sits on a list of strategic priorities due to geographical differences and resource constraints.
- These mismatching priorities could adversely affect the deepening security relationship between Japan and Australia and trilateral planning with the United States, especially if conflict was to erupt on the Korean Peninsula with other flashpoints in the Indo-Pacific, such as the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea.
- This report aims to explore and envision how Australia could coordinate more closely with Japan in response to the escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula while still recognising the geographical and resource limitations that impact Canberra's overall ability to contribute.

Key policy recommendations

- Japan and Australia should consider the possibility that the Trump administration will engage North Korea in dialogue over its nuclear weapons program, and if it does, jointly coordinate on how to pre-emptively shape the United States' approach towards negotiations.
- Japan and Australia should aim to build their resilience against North Korean cyber-attacks and supply chain disruptions in the short term by:
  - Lending Japan Australia's expertise in cybersecurity by declaring a 'cyber partnership' that aims to align Tokyo's cybersecurity policy frameworks with Five Eyes standards.
  - Institutionalising a Track 1 trilateral dialogue with South Korea to consult, exchange information and design joint responses to potential supply chain disruptions linked to North Korean ballistic missile tests, cyber-attacks and incidents at sea.
- In the longer term, Japan and Australia should aim to strengthen joint planning for a future Korean contingency to deter and respond to, if necessary, a hypothetical North Korean attack on South Korean and US forces stationed on the Korean Peninsula and in Japan by:
  - Commencing discussions about potential rotations of Australian Defence Force (ADF) assets and personnel through Japan Self-Defense Force (JSDF) facilities in Japan, as well as those designated by the United Nations Command-Rear in the event of a contingency.
  - Deepening consultations about integrating command and control between the JSDF and the ADF to effectively plan, coordinate and control joint forces and operations.
  - Widening the scope of naval and air exercises, as well as operational intelligence sharing, between the JSDF and the ADF to enhance the degree of interoperability required for combat support missions on and around the Korean Peninsula in the event of a worst-case scenario.
  - Ensuring Australia's rapid inclusion into the United States and Japan's Integrated Air Missile Defence (IAMD) architecture by offering the JSDF the use of Australian missile testing ranges to facilitate deeper integration of Japan and Australia's missile capabilities and industrial defence bases.

This report aims to explore and envision how Australia could coordinate more closely with Japan in response to the escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula while still recognising the geographical and resource limitations that impact Canberra's overall ability to contribute.

Introduction: Australia, Japan, and escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula

The security situation on the Korean Peninsula has been progressively worsening since the 2019 Hanoi Summit, which failed to produce a diplomatic outcome towards North Korea's complete denuclearisation.[2] However, the situation has deteriorated more significantly over the past year due to recent shifts in Pyongyang's policies and posture.[3] The first shift was to its broader foreign and defence policy, which saw the signing of a 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership' with Russia and the deployment of 11,000 Korean People's Army (KPA) personnel to the Russo-Ukrainian War.[4] The second was regarding its posture towards South Korea. In January 2024, Pyongyang categorically 'ruled out' reunification with Seoul, which led to the abandonment of five decades of official policy, and in November, issued an alarming order calling for 'full war preparations' against South Korea that even included the use of nuclear weapons.[5]

Although conflict does not appear imminent as of early 2025, the United States and its allies have still been watching escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula with growing concern.[6] Two of Washington's closest allies, Japan and Australia, have also been deepening their defence relationship partly in response to the worsening security situation on the Korean Peninsula.[7] In October 2022, Tokyo and Canberra signed an updated version of the 'Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation' (JDSC), which includes an alliance-like clause committing both sides to consult on contingencies that affect their sovereignty and regional interests and to consider countermeasures.[8] The JDSC followed the landmark signing of the Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) in January 2022 as Japan's first defence treaty with an international partner since the 1960 *Anpo jōyaku* 'US-Japan Security Treaty'.[9] While not a formal alliance, the RAA will streamline the deployment of their respective militaries to each other's territories, enabling more sophisticated security cooperation.[10]

Despite the escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula having some influence on their deepening alignment, Japan and Australia still hold different views as to where the issue sits on a list of strategic priorities. For Tokyo, the Korean Peninsula is a core concern given its geographical proximity. Meanwhile, for Australia, it is viewed as an issue of lesser strategic importance due to its geographical distance from the Korean Peninsula and the proximity of other flashpoints to the Australian mainland, such as Taiwan and the South China Sea. While a more limited strategic focus is understandable given Canberra's difficulty in projecting power into Northeast Asia, the mismatch in strategic priorities could have adverse effects on Australia's deepening security relationship with Japan, particularly if conflicts were to erupt in quick succession on the Korean Peninsula and in the Taiwan Strait.[11] For example, a recent crisis simulation found that the mismatch has the potential to spark disagreements over risk tolerances and resource allocation in a trilateral response with the United States, should both flashpoints erupt simultaneously.[12]

Therefore, recognising the problem that this mismatch poses while also considering the real limits that Australia has in shaping developments on the Korean Peninsula, this report aims to explore how Canberra could coordinate more closely with Tokyo in response to the heightened tensions. Firstly, this report highlights the significance of Japan and Australia to each other on the Korean Peninsula by examining where their interests intersect. Second, the report outlines recent cooperation between the two vis-à-vis the Korean Peninsula, which has occurred largely within the scope of their respective alliances with the United States. Third, the report explores the potential for deeper bilateral coordination between Tokyo and Canberra on the Korean Peninsula by envisioning it in three areas: pre-emptively shaping the United States's approach to hypothetical negotiations with North Korea, building resilience against provocations from Pyongyang in the short-term, and planning for contingencies on the Korean Peninsula to deter North Korea over the long term. The report then concludes by offering a set of policy recommendations to facilitate deeper coordination vis-a-vis the Korean Peninsula.

Pedestrians in Tokyo walk under a large screen showing images of North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un after North Korea launched a missile that prompted an evacuation alert when it flew over northeastern Japan, October 2022. Source: Getty

The relevance of Japan and Australia to each other on the Korean Peninsula

Japan and Australia each view North Korea's expanding nuclear weapons program as gravely concerning and have leveraged their military and diplomatic influence in an attempt to curb its expansion.[13] However, as of 2025, Pyongyang has still developed enough nuclear fissile material to produce 90 nuclear warheads and assembled 50 nuclear weapons for deployment on both land and sea.[14] North Korea's ongoing refinement of its nuclear weapons program poses an existential threat to Japan due to the potential for a ballistic missile to hit Japanese territory and the negative precedent it sets for nuclear proliferation in East Asia.[15] In October 2022, Pyongyang test-fired the intermediate-range ballistic missile Hwasong-12 over the Tohoku region on the main island of Honshu, into the North Pacific Ocean. In response, the Kishida cabinet issued an emergency warning for its citizens to seek shelter and strongly rebuked North Korea.[16] The October 2022 incident followed a similar test during the height of the 2017-2018 Korean Peninsula Crisis and other tests that have landed in Japan's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).[17]

Despite being evident to Japan due to its geographical proximity to the Korean Peninsula, the threat from Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program seems less apparent to Australia but, in reality, is still as dangerous. Recent advances in its nuclear capabilities mean that the entire Australian continent now falls within the range of North Korea's longest-range Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) Hwasong-15.[18] Although Pyongyang has threatened Australia with a nuclear strike in the past, Canberra's external commitments, such as its contribution to the United Nations (UN) Joint Command in Korea and its alliance with the through the Australia-New Zealand-United States (ANZUS) Treaty, are more likely to draw Canberra into a hypothetical Korean

conflict than any direct strike.[19] Australia has not backed down from defending its ally in the face of North Korean ballistic missile threats either. In 2017, then-Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull threatened to invoke the ANZUS Treaty against Pyongyang if it followed through on its threat to strike US forces in Guam.[20]

Therefore, given the multidimensional threat that North Korea's nuclear weapons program poses, Japan and Australia have vocally supported a tightened UN sanctions regime and contributed to their enforcement in maritime waters near the Korean Peninsula.[21] Since Pyongyang's first nuclear test in 2006, Tokyo and Canberra have complied with UN Security Council resolutions to restrict North Korea's ability to obtain funding, technology, and raw materials from external sources to further develop its nuclear weapons program. These include bans on money transfers, exports of gold, rare-earth minerals, copper, zinc, and natural gas to Pyongyang, as well as limitations on coal exports and oil imports.[22] Meanwhile, to enforce sanctions, Australia and Japan have supported international efforts through Operation Argos. This has seen Canberra play a central role in monitoring and deterring ship-to-ship transfers in the Yellow Sea, with the JSDF supplying the ADF with crucial naval intelligence.[23]

In addition to curbing North Korea's nuclear weapons program, Japan and Australia have a strong interest in preventing supply chain disruptions on and around the Korean Peninsula. If a hypothetical crisis were to erupt that escalated into a second Korean conflict, the potential disruptions to international trade would result in massive economic losses for Canberra and Tokyo. As insular maritime states located off the coast of continental Northeast and Southeast Asia, Japan and Australia are highly reliant upon international Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) for the import and export of goods and natural resources. One of these core SLOCs for energy resources notably traverses the south of the Korean Peninsula through the Tsushima Strait and flows into the East China Sea and the Sea of Japan, which would likely be affected in the event of a conflict.[24]

Alongside neighbouring SLOCs, South Korea's national security is directly tied to Japan's and Australia's economic security due to their profound degree of trade and resource interdependence. In 2024, South Korea became Japan and Australia's third-largest two-way trading partner valued at US$71.1 billion and US$39 billion, respectively. For Japan, the three largest exports to South Korea consist of Machinery Having Industrial Functions ($5.4 billion), Integrated Circuits ($4.1 billion), and Refined Petroleum ($2.3 billion), and its three top imports from Seoul are Refined Petroleum ($5.3 billion), Integrated Circuits ($1.6 billion) and Hot-Rolled Iron ($921 million).[25] The economic relationship between the two countries was affected from 2019 to 2023 by a trade war stemming from historical grievances.[26] However, this has stabilised since the now-impeached President of South Korea, Yoon Seok-yeol, assumed office in 2022.[27]

Australia's greater dependency on exports to and imports from South Korea could lead to even more profound disruptions to its economy than Japan in the event of a Korean contingency. Canberra is a major supplier of raw materials and agricultural products to Seoul. Australia's top three exports to South Korea are coal ($6.9 billion), liquefied natural gas (LNG) ($6.1 billion), and iron ore ($4.9 billion).[28] If Japan becomes entangled in a contingency, the economic costs for Australia could be even higher. Tokyo accounts for 17.9% of Canberra's total exports and 36% of its total LNG exports. When combined with LNG exports to South Korea (14%), a Korean contingency could result in roughly 50% of Australia's LNG exports ($92 billion) being affected, which would cause significant damage to an economy already heavily dependent on the export of natural resources.[29]

Therefore, in order to exert pressure on North Korea to limit the expansion of its nuclear weapons program and prevent it from acting provocatively towards South Korea, deepening security cooperation between the United States, South Korea, Japan and Australia has become vital in maintaining a favourable strategic balance on the Korean Peninsula. However, the recent signing of the North Korea-Russia CSP and the 'no limits' strategic partnership between China and Russia have the potential to alter this balance.[30] Pyongyang's recent unveiling of suicide attack drones and a nuclear-powered submarine capable of carrying ballistic missiles suggests that a shift may already be underway.[31] Alongside the long-standing but historically complex China-North Korea alliance, the power dynamics on the Korean Peninsula are now increasingly reminiscent of the Cold War, where Pyongyang effectively pivoted between Moscow and Beijing for economic and military aid to help sustain its resource-poor economy.

The reversion of Cold War era-type alignments means that it will be increasingly difficult for the United States and its allies to exert a maximum pressure policy of sanctions on North Korea as it decreases incentives for Pyongyang to change its behaviour and may even embolden it to act more aggressively. Due to the adversarial relations between the United States and its allies on the one hand and China and Russia on the other, Beijing and Moscow could be less willing to apply pressure on North Korea and may even aim to disrupt Australian and Japanese efforts to enforce sanctions. Indeed, this potential was most recently demonstrated when the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) directed sonar pulses towards Royal Australian Navy (RAN) divers on *HMAS Toowoomba* within Japan's EEZ in late 2023, as they participated in Operation Argos to enforce sanctions against North Korea.[32]

Recent coordination between Japan and Australia vis-a-vis the Korean Peninsula

Although China's naval expansion has been the primary factor driving security cooperation between Japan and Australia in the Western Pacific, many of the recent initiatives aimed at Beijing also have flow-on effects for managing rising tensions on the Korean Peninsula. One of these initiatives has been the increased sharing of intelligence between Tokyo, Canberra and Washington. In November 2023, a Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) P-8 Poseidon joined the Japan Air Self-Defense Forces (JASDF) and the United States Navy (USN) in joint intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) in the maritime waters surrounding Japan.[33] Australia's participation in trilateral ISR complements plans for Canberra's inclusion into the "Japan-U.S. Bilateral Information Analysis Cell" (BIAC), which will likely enhance its ability to interdict ships bound for North Korea by providing the ADF access to real-time intelligence.[34]

In addition to greater intelligence sharing, Australia and Japan have hosted bilateral military exercises to support US and South Korean efforts to deter North Korean provocations. Since the deterioration of relations with China, Australia has shown an increased willingness to participate in military exercises with Japan. Although primarily designed to deter Chinese maritime coercion, joint exercises have also been directed towards addressing escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula with a focus on maintaining regional peace and stability.[35] Aside from the naval Exercise Nichi-gou Trident, which was first commissioned in 2009, Tokyo and Canberra held Exercise Bushido Guardian in September 2023 for the first time since the RAA came into effect.[36] This saw the RAAF deploy six F-35 Lightning II fighters to Komatsu Air Base in Ishikawa Prefecture, Japan, for joint combat training over a nine-day period. The RAAF's participation in Bushido Guardian 23 was notably preceded by two Japan Air Self-Defence Forces (JASDF) F-35s visiting RAAF Base Tindal in Australia's Northern Territory on their first overseas deployment in August 2023.[37]

Trilateral exercises with the United States have been the largest area of growth, though. In 2023, more than 200 ADF personnel participated alongside 1,500 US Army personnel and 4,500 personnel from the Japan Ground Self-Defense Forces (JGSDF) in the largest iteration of Exercise Yama Sakura.[38] Yama Sakura helped to increase interoperability between Australian, Japanese and US ground forces to respond to potential conflict scenarios across the Indo-Pacific, including on the Korean Peninsula.[39] In addition to participating in Yama Sakura for the second time in 2024, Australia also joined Exercise Keen Edge and Exercise Keen Sword alongside the United States and Japan. Exercise Keen Sword saw 80 ADF personnel deployed to work with the US Armed Forces (USAF) and the JSDF to simulate the defence of Japan. Canberra is expected to participate in Exercise Orient Shield for the first time in 2025 — the largest land-based exercise between US and Japanese forces to enhance readiness for potential contingencies.[40]

Japan and Australia have also made plans to integrate their military-industrial bases with the United States and among each other as tensions on the Korean Peninsula and in other regional flashpoints rise. At the US-Japan Summit Meeting in April 2024, former US President Joe Biden and then-Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio announced plans to create a "networked air defense architecture" between Washington, Tokyo and Canberra.[41] Although China's growing edge in conventional and nuclear

strike capabilities played a large role in its declaration, integrating the three nations' missile defence helps deter and potentially respond to North Korean missile threats. In March 2024, the Pacific IAMD Center (PIC) conducted the Multilateral IAMD eXperiment (MIX) that brought together IAMD professionals from the United States, Japan and Australia. The experiment saw planners design geographically based command and control (C2) systems across the Pacific to respond to hypothetical provocations from Pyongyang.[42]

Integrating missile defence serves as a smaller snapshot of a broader agenda of defence technology cooperation driving Japan and Australia's deepening strategic alignment.[43] Given Pyongyang's unveiling of a nuclear-powered submarine, cooperation on research and development (R&D) of maritime defence technology could not be more timely.[44] In January 2024, Japan's Acquisition, Technology and Logistics Agency (ATLA) signed an agreement for research on undersea warfare with Australia's Defence Science and Technology Group (DSTG). The agreement will see Tokyo and Canberra cooperate on achieving underwater acoustic communication technology for collaboration between Underwater Unmanned Vehicles (UUV).[45] If successful, the project will enable greater detection of and response to threats posed to Japan's security by North Korea's growing capability to conduct undersea warfare.

Meanwhile, a series of bilateral, trilateral and minilateral dialogues have facilitated their joint agenda to strengthen sanctions enforcement, military exercises and military-industrial integration. The "2+2" Foreign and Defence Ministerial Consultations between Japan and Australia have served as the premier bilateral forum since 2008 to jointly condemn North Korean missile launches and discuss responses.[46] In its 11th iteration in 2024, both sides reaffirmed their cooperation in dealing with Pyongyang and its advancements in military cooperation with Russia.[47] The Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD) with the United States has also assisted in the formulation of joint approaches towards the Korean Peninsula. The Joint Statement of the Trilateral Defense Ministers' Meeting (TDMM) in 2024 strongly condemned North Korea's military cooperation with Russia and committed to expanding joint exercises, operational coordination, planning and demonstrating a greater regional presence.[48]

Japan and Australia have also approached South Korea to explore trilateralism to help manage tensions on the Korean Peninsula. In July 2024, Canberra, Tokyo and Seoul held their first Track 1-level leaders' dialogue, where they strongly condemned the "illicit military cooperation between the Russian Federation and North Korea" and called upon both countries to "immediately cease all activities that violate UNSC resolutions."[49] In November 2024, representatives from the three countries also convened a Track 1.5 dialogue for 'future-oriented cooperation'.[50] The participants emphasised the importance of aligning strategic planning among Japan, Australia and South Korea, and building sufficient capacity to respond in the event of a Korean contingency or if several flashpoints erupt rapidly across the Indo-Pacific.[51]

Plans to create a "networked air defense architecture" between Washington, Tokyo and Canberra were announced at the US-Japan Summit Meeting in April 2024. Although China's growing edge in conventional and nuclear strike capabilities played a large role in its declaration, integrating the three nations' missile defence helps deter and potentially respond to North Korean missile threats.

Envisioning greater coordination in response to escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula

Despite recent policies having flow-on effects for managing escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula, Japan and Australia should do more in a bilateral capacity to ensure that their security relationship is not adversely affected by their mismatched priorities in the Western Pacific.[52] Deepening bilateral coordination with the aim of complementing US and South Korean efforts to manage tensions on the Korean Peninsula will be even more crucial now that President Donald Trump has returned to the White House. Therefore, Tokyo and Canberra will need to envision ways to coordinate more independently of the United States while also trying to moderate some of the President's more revisionist and transactional preferences. Although Australia's degree of involvement on the Korean Peninsula will be constrained by geographical factors and power limitations, there are ways that Canberra can still help Tokyo respond to new developments. These include pre-emptively shaping the United States' approach to negotiations with North Korea, building resilience against provocations from Pyongyang in the short term, and planning for hypothetical contingencies to deter North Korea in the long term.

Pre-emptively shaping Trump's approach to negotiations with North Korea

Japan and Australia will need to consider the possibility that the Trump administration may engage North Korea in dialogue over arms control or denuclearisation in the next three years. Although it remains unlikely that Tokyo or Canberra would play a defining role in negotiations with Pyongyang, Tokyo and Canberra should coordinate ahead of time to shape the President's approach to negotiations based on their shared interest in North Korea's complete denuclearisation.[53] For this to be successful, Japanese and Australian policy-makers will need to leverage their relationships with key figures in the Trump administration to caution the President about the potentially negative consequences for their security if he strikes a deal without consulting them. However, given President Trump's overall disregard for the interests of US allies, it remains uncertain how much real influence Japan and Australia could have on his thinking.

Moreover, it remains unclear whether North Korea would even consider returning to the negotiating table, given the noticeable policy shifts in Pyongyang. In October 2024, a North Korean envoy to the UN ruled out leader-to-leader diplomacy over its nuclear weapons program irrespective of the outcome of the US election.[54] This echoes statements from Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un in September 2022 calling Pyongyang's status as a nuclear weapons state "irreversible" and 'non-negotiable", which could render engagement without denuclearisation as a core priority leading to the implicit recognition of North Korea as a nuclear weapons state and legitimising its illicit sanctions evasion activities.[55] The recent improvement of relations with Russia further decreases incentives for North Korea to come to the negotiating table, as Pyongyang will be able to mitigate the isolating effects of sanctions by exporting military equipment and natural resources to bolster Moscow's war effort in Ukraine.

However, this does not mean that Australia and Japan should not try if the situation arises. Concerned about President Trump's transactional approach towards allies during his first term, former Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo forged a friendship with President Trump that allowed Tokyo to exert influence over the United States' approach to negotiations with North Korea during the 2018-2019 Korean Peace Process.[56] Their close bond led President Trump to state that the United States was "behind Japan, our great ally, 100 percent" and to promise Abe that he would push for the release of 12 Japanese abductees during the 2018 Singapore Summit.[57] Despite this, Abe's assassination at a political rally in 2022 means that Japan can no longer leverage this bond to persuade the Trump administration to consider its interests. This presents an opportunity for Tokyo and Canberra to coordinate on how to fill the void to ensure that Trump does not strike a deal that leaves the two countries at greater risk to North Korea's disruptive activities.

Personnel from the Royal Australian Navy and Japan Maritime Self Defence Force inspect hardware components during Exercise Blue Spectrum, Sydney, May 2024. Source: Australian Department of Defence

Lending Australian expertise to enhance Japan's cyber-resilience

In the short term, decreasing Japan's vulnerability towards information breaches from cyber-attacks is one area where Tokyo and Canberra can feasibly build resilience against Pyongyang.[58] In recent years, North Korea has trained a highly sophisticated cyber army to help it evade sanctions and gather intelligence on its adversaries.[59] In May 2024, Japan became a victim of a North Korean cyberattack when the TraderTraitor group gained access to Tokyo-based DMM Bitcoin that resulted in the theft of approximately US$308 million worth of cryptocurrency.[60] The 2024 attack on DMM Bitcoin followed other attacks on Japan's critical infrastructure. Both Japan's Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) and the country's largest port, the Port of Nagoya, have experienced repeated ransomware attacks since 2023, which has led the Japanese Diet to recently approve a bill on active cyber defence.[61]

Given Australia's advanced cyber capabilities and its membership in the Five Eyes (FVEY) network, Tokyo and Canberra should consider declaring a 'cyber partnership' to assist Japan in aligning its policy frameworks and cyber-defence with FVEY standards. A proposed framework for a 'cyber partnership' aimed at reforming Japan's cyber capabilities could emerge from existing cooperation through the Australia-Japan Cyber Policy Dialogue.[62] Dispatching legal and cyber experts to Japan to advise and collaborate with government and private sector stakeholders would help align frameworks for cyber attribution and share information about cyber sanctions, thereby enhancing resilience against North Korean cyberattacks. While progress is being made on aligning policies and frameworks, Tokyo and Canberra should conduct regular bilateral cyber exercises and deepen trilateral exercises with the United States through Exercise Blue-Spectrum. This will help improve detection and response, hone the skills of Japanese cyber professionals, and enhance interoperability with their Australian counterparts.[63]

However, assisting Japan in aligning its cyber policy frameworks and cyber-defences with FVEY standards will not be problem-free. One significant issue

relates to the technical constraints surrounding Tokyo's ability to cooperate with foreign partners on offensive and defensive cyber warfare operations. Slow decision-making processes on intelligence reform, as well as the JSDF's relatively small cyber defence command, may restrict the scope of cooperation required to enhance Tokyo's resilience.[64] Despite this, the recently approved bill on 'active cyber defence' that establishes a 'cybersecurity council' and a committee to oversee information gathering and analysis will provide the groundwork for Japanese cyber professionals to potentially work more closely with their Australian counterparts. Moreover, the cyber bill enables Japan to identify and neutralise the sources of cyber threats in spite of constitutional constraints, providing a starting point for both sides to deepen coordination on cyber warfare operations and enhance their resilience against North Korean infiltrations.[65]

Institutionalising a Track 1 Australia-Japan-South Korea trilateral

Another measure that Japan and Australia should adopt to enhance resilience against North Korea in the interim is to formally institutionalise the Australia-Japan-South Korea (AJK) trilateral. Holding the AJK biannually at the Track 1 level would signal to Pyongyang that, despite the deteriorating strategic environment in other areas of the Indo-Pacific, the Korean Peninsula remains a significant priority for both Tokyo and Canberra. The AJK would add another layer of resilience beyond the US-South Korea, US-Japan alliances and the US-Japan-South Korea trilateral, enabling the three countries to exchange information, close perception gaps and formulate joint responses to North Korean provocations. Similar to the Quad, any formal AJK dialogue could enable Tokyo, Canberra and Seoul to coordinate on keeping the United States engaged on the Korean Peninsula while streamlining responses to policies from the Trump administration that may increase or decrease their resilience against Pyongyang.

Therefore, to 'smooth out the kinks' towards establishing deeper habits of cooperation, Japan, Australia and South Korea should coordinate on enhancing their economic security in line with their highly interdependent trading relationships and shared visions for a free, open and rules-based Indo-Pacific.[66] This may see Canberra, Tokyo and Seoul exchange information and design joint responses to potential supply chain disruptions linked to North Korean ballistic missile tests, cyber-attacks and incidents at sea. As geopolitical rifts deepen between China and US regional allies, reducing each other's economic dependence on Beijing by encouraging the three countries to explore trade and investment opportunities among themselves, as well as with ASEAN member states and India, would enhance their resilience against economic retaliation if the trilateral defence agenda expands.

However, it remains an open question as to whether trilateral cooperation between Japan, Australia and South Korea without the United States' participation is in each of their interests.[67] This is because North Korea views Washington's presence on the Korean Peninsula as the main cause behind its development of a nuclear deterrent. This leads Pyongyang to view the United States as the sole actor worth interacting with, which could render the AJK without the United States' involvement as having little impact on changing North Korea's behaviour outside of their existing alliances. Despite this, the trilateral's broader agenda, which could include defence industry collaboration, trade and humanitarian assistance, may at least provide an outlet for all three countries to independently demonstrate opposition to provocations from Pyongyang and coordinate responses when they occur.

If the AJK does become institutionalised, managing potential flare-ups in tensions between Japan and South Korea, as well as ingrained habits of cooperation, will be paramount to ensuring that it survives long enough to be effective in building resilience against North Korea. There are sharp divides in opinion on closer relations with Japan between South Korea's two major political parties. The conservative People's Power Party (PPP) is receptive deeper engagement while the progressive Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) remains sceptical of Tokyo due to historical grievances.[68] The 'seesawing' nature of South Korea's relations with Japan has similarly correlated with periods of deepened interest and apathy in relations with Australia.[69] Recent comments from DPK leader Lee Jae-myung about having no objections to deepened relations with Japan, however, suggest that South Korea could break with historical trends in its foreign policy as the balance of power on the Korean Peninsula becomes less favourable to Seoul.[70]

Strategic planning and crisis response: The largest area for growth?

Deterrence relies on the credibility of a state's ability and willingness to respond to an armed attack.[71] Possessing both the intent and capability to respond to a conflict on the Korean Peninsula can help deter North Korean provocations and allow for rapid deployment if deterrence fails. Since the signing of the RAA and the JDSC, a growing number of defence commentators have begun to describe the Japan-Australia relationship as an alliance in all but name, which has heightened expectations in the public domain regarding what security cooperation could and should achieve.[72] Despite the main geographical focus of their alignment having been the Taiwan Strait and the East and South China Seas so far, Tokyo and Canberra may find themselves operating closely together in a hypothetical Korean contingency due to their respective alliance commitments to the United States.[73] Therefore, both sides must envision ways to coordinate on strategic planning and logistics if a crisis escalates and, in a worst-case scenario, participate in joint combat operations around the Korean Peninsula.

Although the new "trilateral defence cooperation" and expanded joint exercises with the United States are important in this regard, Japan and Australia will need to deepen military-to-military coordination between the JSDF and the ADF to better secure their interests,[74] including those vis-à-vis the Korean Peninsula. Bilateral security cooperation between Tokyo and Canberra remains the US-Japan-Australia trilateral's "weakest link."[75] This integration gap raises questions about how both sides would and could respond jointly to a hypothetical Korean contingency. As it stands, their responses would be fragmented since Canberra would likely operate through the UNC in Korea and the ANZUS alliance, while Japan would probably operate through the UNC-Rear and the US-Japan alliance.[76] Therefore, given the recent signing of the RAA, Tokyo and Canberra should discuss potential rotations of ADF assets and personnel through JSDF facilities and the UNC-Rear in the event of a conflict in the Western Pacific, including on the Korean Peninsula. There are precedents for an expanded ADF presence in Japan as Australia currently leads the UNC-Rear at Yokota Air Base in Tokyo, and ADF personnel were stationed at Hiro and Iwakuni in western Japan during the Korean War.[77]

Although the new "trilateral defence cooperation" and expanded joint exercises with the United States are important in this regard, Japan and Australia will need to deepen military-to-military coordination between the JSDF and the ADF to better secure their interests, including those vis-à-vis the Korean Peninsula.

Alongside discussing potential ADF rotations through Japan, Tokyo and Canberra should deepen consultations on integrating command and control between the JSDF and the ADF to effectively plan, coordinate and control joint forces and operations. As Japan is not a formal member of the UNC, the JSDF would most likely be expected to provide logistical and combat support to US and UNC forces (including Australia) in a Korean contingency.[78] However, there may be scenarios where the JSDF and the ADF would need to coordinate with each other to assist the USAF, other UNC forces and even the Republic of Korea (ROK) Armed Forces. For example, the JSDF and the ADF could jointly conduct ISR in maritime waters around the Korean Peninsula, protect sea lanes of communication on the approaches to the Peninsula, escort US vessels traversing between Japanese and Korean naval ports, and even provide air support to US and UNC forces on the ground in Korea.

Therefore, to enhance the degree of interoperability required for any joint response to a hypothetical conflict in the Western Pacific, including on the Korean Peninsula, Japan and Australia will need to deepen

bilateral military exercises and increase operational intelligence sharing. Widening the scope of naval exercises to include the RAN and JMSDF's submarines could help complement the growing interoperability achieved by the RAN and JMSDF's ships through Operation Nichi-gou Trident.[79] This would help both navies become as interoperable as they are with the USN to better enable any integrated response. Moreover, holding Exercise Bushido Guardian biannually could enable the RAAF and JASDF to conduct more sophisticated missions and exercises applicable to conflict scenarios on the Korean Peninsula and elsewhere, such as bilateral ISR, refuelling exercises and other joint exercises that simulate both sides providing air cover to assets at sea.

Planning for worst-case scenarios on the Korean Peninsula will also require Australia's rapid integration into the United States and Japan's IAMD architecture. Tokyo and Canberra's likely focus on protecting sea lanes of communication in a hypothetical Korean contingency could result in merchant vessels and/or JSDF and ADF assets becoming legitimate targets for North Korean ballistic missiles. Alongside continuing frequent simulations on IAMD command and control between the United States, Japan and Australia, Canberra should offer Tokyo the use of Australian missile testing ranges, such as the Woomera Testing Range in South Australia and other facilities, to test and evaluate Japan's long-range conventional strike capabilities, including Tomahawk cruise missiles.[80] Granting Japan access to Australian missile testing ranges would help the JSDF and ADF integrate their missile capabilities and industrial defence bases while providing Tokyo with the opportunity to test longer-range missiles without jeopardising the safety of its citizens or exposing vital intelligence to its rivals.[81]

However, Australia and Japan must address a range of perception, logistical and coordination issues before they can effectively respond together in a hypothetical contingency, either on the Korean Peninsula or elsewhere. The first hurdle will be moderating institutional preferences to prioritise coordination with the United States over collaboration with each other.[82] To remedy this, there must be shifts in deeply rooted perceptions regarding the limits of security cooperation within their respective policy-making institutions, which have been influenced by the prolonged negotiations over the RAA and the lingering 'trauma' regarding the unsuccessful Soryu class submarine bid.[83] However, the institutional shocks resulting from the Trump administration's reversal of the United States' approach towards NATO, combined with the potential boost to the security partnership if Japan's bid for Australia's acquisition of the Mogami class frigate is successful, may serve as catalysts to break longstanding habits of over-reliance on Washington and mitigate institutional pessimism about the limits of bilateral security cooperation.[84]

The second issue relates to logistical challenges that complicate discussions of potential ADF rotations through Japan and the hosting of more frequent and sophisticated military exercises. The RAA has only recently come into force and there are differing views among Japanese and Australian officials regarding how it should be implemented and the types of activities that it permits.[85] As Australia is geographically distant from the Korean Peninsula but directly engaged through the UNC and ANZUS, questions remain about the type of support that Canberra would and could offer Japan in the event of a contingency. Strategic planners in Tokyo and Canberra will then need to assess their respective comfort levels and clarify their expectations of one another's roles. Minimising organisational and communication differences to ensure an adequate level of integration will also be key for any joint response, provided policymakers decide that this is in their best interests.[86]

Regular consultations with the United States and South Korea will be crucial for understanding their views on Japan and Australia's role in any hypothetical Korean contingency. While any JSDF involvement will likely be limited to support roles, addressing Seoul's concerns, especially regarding a renewed Japanese presence on and around the Korean Peninsula, is vital for ensuring that any threat to intervene is perceived as credible by North Korea and its allies. Thus, enhancing confidence and testing comfort levels between Tokyo, Canberra and Seoul regarding strategic planning and crisis response should be a core priority. Institutionalising the AJK trilateral and regularly holding more informal Track 1.5 dialogues would be significant steps towards establishing the frameworks to facilitate such discussions in this regard.

Conclusion: Closing the gap

Although Japan and Australia have deepened their security cooperation in recent years, significant capability gaps and mismatches in strategic priorities still persist at the bilateral level, which could complicate a joint response to future conflict scenarios in the Indo-Pacific. The escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula serve as a notable case. This report has aimed to draw greater attention to existing gaps and mismatches and envisioned ways to close them. It suggests the following policy recommendations to best coordinate their efforts in dealing with growing tensions on the Korean Peninsula, some of which can be applied to other flashpoints where their interests are sufficiently engaged, such as the Taiwan Strait and the East China Sea.

- Japan and Australia should consider the possibility that the Trump administration will engage North Korea in dialogue over its nuclear weapons program, and if it does, jointly coordinate on how to pre-emptively shape the United States' approach towards negotiations.
- Japan and Australia should aim to build their resilience against North Korean cyber-attacks and supply chain disruptions in the short term by:
  - Lending Japan Australia's expertise in cybersecurity by declaring a 'cyber partnership' that aims to align Tokyo's cybersecurity policy frameworks with Five Eyes standards.
  - Institutionalising a Track 1 trilateral dialogue with South Korea to consult, exchange information and design joint responses to potential supply chain disruptions linked to North Korean ballistic missile tests, cyber-attacks and incidents at sea.
- In the longer term, Japan and Australia should aim to strengthen joint planning for a future Korean contingency to deter and respond to, if necessary, a hypothetical North Korean attack on South Korea and US forces stationed on the Korean Peninsula and in Japan by:
  - Commencing discussions about potential rotations of Australian Defence Force (ADF) assets and personnel through Japan Self-Defense Force (JSDF) facilities in Japan, as well as those designated by the United Nations Command-Rear in the event of a contingency.
  - Deepening consultations about integrating command and control between the JSDF and the ADF to effectively plan, coordinate and control joint forces and operations.
  - Widening the scope of naval and air exercises, as well as operational intelligence sharing, between the JSDF and the ADF to enhance the degree of interoperability required for combat support missions on and around the Korean Peninsula in the event of a worst-case scenario.
  - Ensuring Australia's rapid inclusion into the United States and Japan's Integrated Air Missile Defence (IAMD) architecture by offering the JSDF the use of Australian missile testing ranges to facilitate deeper integration of Japan's and Australia's missile capabilities and industrial defence bases.

While ambitious, it remains important that any proposal for greater coordination on the Korean Peninsula considers the geographical and resource constraints of both sides while keeping pace with developments in their respective alliances with the United States and partnerships with South Korea. Therefore, before formulating and implementing measures that enable a joint response, policy professionals and defence planners will need to engage in deeper dialogue to close threat perception gaps and better pinpoint where their interests converge and diverge. This is where this report aims to contribute by providing a foundation from which an agenda can be developed to achieve the necessary degree of coordination in responding to the deteriorating strategic situation on the Korean Peninsula.

Preparing for a protracted maritime war: The strategic case for Japan-Australia naval industry cooperation

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Executive summary

- Japan and Australia's defence posture would face its most severe test in the event of a high-intensity, protracted US-China war over Taiwan. While US strategic discussions have traditionally focused on surviving a short and sharp conflict, recent attention has shifted toward the challenges of sustaining a protracted war. Reflecting this shift, strategic communities in Australia and Japan have begun emphasising the need to enhance resilience and preparedness for long-term warfare. Nevertheless, neither country has developed comprehensive strategies or analyses for sustaining military operations during an extended conflict. Bilateral defence cooperation between Japan and Australia can potentially address this issue.
- Since the inception of the Self Defense Forces (SDF), Japan has structured its defence strategy around the expectation that the United States would serve as the 'arsenal of democracy' in the event of a protracted war. This has resulted in chronic underinvestment in Japan's war sustainment capabilities. However, the current state of the US defence industrial base, particularly in the maritime domain, has significantly weakened to the level that Japan must reexamine its long-held assumption.
- In recent years, Japan has taken steps to enhance its defence industry capability and capacity. However, these efforts have not been focused on ensuring the sustainment of operations during wartime. Moreover, the lack of strategic depth makes the entire defence industrial base vulnerable to Chinese attacks, constraining the SDF's ability to rely on domestic production alone.
- A logical alternative is for Japan to collaborate with Australia, which is making significant investments in its defence industrial base and benefits from a strategic depth that Japan lacks. By working together, Japan and Australia can address these vulnerabilities. To this end, the two countries should pursue cooperation in the following areas.

Key policy recommendations

- Japan and Australia's bilateral defence cooperation should prioritise developing Australian shipyards capable of servicing Japanese destroyers. Selecting the Upgraded Mogami class for SEA 3000 would enable Australian shipyards to stock critical components and gain in-depth knowledge of the vessel.
- Both governments must be prepared to adapt rapidly in the event of a protracted war, including examining scenarios in which a significant portion of allied surface combatants are damaged or sunk. The two navies should also explore how to continue fighting effectively if most of their current fleets are neutralised. In this context, joint efforts to develop and integrate unmanned surface vessels, which governments are already pursuing through separate initiatives, could prove especially valuable.
- Japan and Australia must engage the United States to emphasise the critical importance of allied sustainment capabilities in a protracted war and seek cooperation from the United States in strengthening them. Persuading the US Navy to service its destroyers in Australian shipyards, rather than in Northeast Asia during peacetime, would help strengthen the Australian industrial base.

Australia's Minister for Defence Industry and Capability Delivery the Honourable Pat Conroy MP visited the BAE Systems Australia facility at the Osborne Naval Shipyard, January 2025. Source: Australian Department of Defence

Introduction

The Japan-Australia relationship is officially described as a "Special Strategic Partnership," yet it lacks a widely shared strategic rationale for in-depth defence cooperation. This absence of a clear framework creates uncertainty regarding the scope of cooperation and the division of labour in wartime, despite both countries' commitment to "consult each other on contingencies that may affect [their] sovereignty and regional security interests."[87] This paper argues that Japan-Australia defence cooperation should be structured to effectively complement each country's respective weaknesses, particularly in the context of a protracted US-China war over Taiwan.

The bilateral defence relationship between Japan and Australia has increasingly taken on the characteristics of an alliance, rather than the quasi-alliance it had long been described as. Both Japan's and Australia's national defence strategies have emphasised the value of the relationship with the latter, describing Japan as "indispensable".[88] The two governments have also agreed to station liaison officers in each other's command centres and Japan has been conducting asset protection missions for Australian vessels.[89] Despite the significance of this growing defence cooperation, expert discussions on the strategic rationale behind closer bilateral defence coordination remain insufficient. In particular, there has been limited examination of how Japan and Australia would collaborate in a conflict scenario. Amid increasing uncertainty over US commitments, Japan and Australia must not only deepen their defence cooperation but also strategically align their efforts. Strengthening collective deterrence, enhancing defence capabilities and clarifying the division of roles in wartime will be critical to mitigating defence risks.

The Japan-Australia defence cooperation should be structured to enable both countries to offset each other's strategic and operational weaknesses, as both face distinct yet significant defence challenges. Since the release of its three strategic documents in 2022, Japan has focused on enhancing military effectiveness through seven key pillars, including "sustainability and resiliency." Similarly, Australia's 2024 National Defence Strategy prioritises strengthening maritime capabilities. However, both nations face structural constraints: Japan, with its limited resources and strategic depth, struggles to sustain prolonged military operations, while Australia, despite its plans to more than double its fleet, lacks the domestic shipbuilding capacity to achieve this objective.

By leveraging their respective strengths, Japan and Australia can work together to mitigate these weaknesses, creating a more resilient and complementary defence posture. Through strategic coordination and targeted cooperation, both nations can enhance their overall defence capabilities and achieve a synergistic effect in their defence enterprise.

The following sections will examine how Japan can prepare itself for sustained operations in a protracted conflict by focusing on cooperation with the Australians in the repair and acquisition of platforms, particularly surface combatants. While submarines, fighter aircraft and unmanned assets are indispensable in a Western Pacific conflict, surface combatants warrant particular attention due to their high versatility and critical role in protecting sea lines of communication (SLOC), which are vital to Japan's survival.[90] This paper will then explore the potential for Japan-Australia cooperation in naval shipbuilding and repair, with the dual objective of enhancing Australia's shipbuilding capacity and providing Japan access to a secure defence industrial base in a protracted war.

A long war in the Western Pacific?

The scenario that would place the greatest level of stress on the defence of Japan and Australia would be a high-intensity and prolonged US-China war over Taiwan. The US strategic community, which has led the discussion about a potential US-China war triggered by a prospective People's Liberation Army's (PLA) invasion of Taiwan, has traditionally focused on surviving a short and sharp war. For years, tabletop exercises focusing on the initial weeks of the war have provided valuable insights, highlighting the critical importance of the resiliency of defence infrastructures to survive the first strike and underscoring the role of allies, particularly Japan, in contributing from the earliest stages of the conflict.[91] Recently, however, the scope of these discussions has expanded to the post-initial stage of the conflict, to

include studying how to win a protracted war.[92] The US Naval Institute has been at the forefront of this shift, spearheading the conversation through its "American Sea Power Project." This initiative focuses on the second phase of a five-phase framework of war: the initial fight, recovery, seizing the initiative, the long campaign and war termination.[93] In line with this broader perspective, many US strategists and defence industry leaders are now advocating for developing a robust defence industrial base capable of sustaining a high-intensity, multi-year conflict.[94]

This shift in focus can be attributed to four key factors. First, there is a growing recognition that wars among major powers historically tend to last longer than initially intended or expected.[95] Second, Ukraine's unexpected success in resisting Russian aggression underscores how militaries in a disadvantaged position can endure an initial assault from a stronger adversary — often due to the adversary's miscalculations — thereby increasing the likelihood of a prolonged conflict.[96] Third, strategists have increasingly acknowledged that China's defence industry has already effectively adopted a wartime posture while the United States struggles to match its pace.[97] Notably, China's shipbuilding industry boasts a production capacity 230 times greater than the United States'.[98] Finally, there is a shared understanding within the strategic community that neither the United States nor China is likely to back down after incurring significant losses, further raising the likelihood of a protracted war.[99]

Inspired by these discussions, strategic communities in Australia and Japan have also begun to explore the possibility and implications of a prolonged war. Australia's strategic documents emphasise efforts to secure fuel supplies, strengthen supply chains and improve the resilience of its military bases.[100] Yet, there has been little discussion on a theory of victory in the event of a prolonged conflict.

Similarly, in Japan, the importance of sustaining military operations has been recognised, leading to progress in the procurement of equipment parts and ammunition. However, the focus remains on stockpiling these resources during peacetime, and discussions on how to procure them in wartime remain insufficient. While there are some ongoing discourses regarding a protracted war, these tend to centre on energy and food security rather than military strategy or operational aspects.[101]

Strengthening collective deterrence, enhancing defence capabilities and clarifying the division of roles in wartime will be critical to mitigating defence risks.

To date, no publicly available study has comprehensively addressed the military issues that Japan and Australia would face in sustaining a prolonged war. Given the likelihood of a protracted maritime conflict in the Indo-Pacific region, the two governments must take the prospect of a protracted war seriously and better align their defence strategies to address this challenge. Without significant policy shifts and deeper analysis, these nations risk being unprepared to meet the demands of a high-intensity, long-duration conflict.

Assessing Japan's viability in a protracted war

In December 2022, the Japanese Government released its National Defense Strategy, acknowledging the significant deterioration in the security environment due to the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and rising tensions in the Taiwan Strait.[102] The strategy identified military "sustainability and resiliency" as one of the seven essential capabilities, emphasising the need to improve the Japan Self Defense Forces' (JSDF) ability to "continue persistent activities in contingencies."[103] Importantly, these measures were not aimed at bolstering the JSDF's capability to fight a protracted war. Instead, they were focused on enhancing readiness by addressing long-standing deficiencies in the procurement of equipment parts and ammunition.

As most militaries do, the JSDF has plans to rapidly increase all its platforms' readiness in times of emer-

gency and hold enough spare parts and ammunition to conduct a pre-determined number of missions. However, prior to 2019, JSDF's readiness was worsening every year. Due to a shortage of spare parts, it was forced to cannibalise other platforms for interchangeable components to keep operating others.[104] Although this practice has been adopted by many militaries and organisations for its short-term effectiveness, it significantly undermines overall fleet readiness in the medium to long term.[105] While the prevalence of this practice has been decreasing since 2019, the Ministry of Defense estimates that an acceptable level of readiness will not be reached until 2027.[106]

Ammunition storage has also been reported to be in dire condition. In 2015, high-ranking officials in the Ministry of Defense were anxious whether the JSDF could fight for two weeks should Japan get involved in a war with China.[107] It was reported that, in 2022, while the JSDF was required to have three months' worth of ammunition stockpiles, it had only two months' worth.[108] Even missiles for ballistic missile defence operations against North Korea, which the JSDF have been on high alert for since 2016, were low in stock. The Ministry of Defense revealed that the JSDF only had 60% of the required missile capacity for ballistic missile defence operations.[109]

The limited availability of spare parts and ammunition stems from a defence procurement strategy that prioritises large platforms, such as Aegis destroyers and F-35s, over sustainment resources. Since 2010, the JSDF has concentrated on presence and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance missions mainly in the Indo-Pacific region, aimed at shaping China and North Korea's actions and fostering a favourable security environment.[110] This strategy did not require the active use of live ammunition or high-end mission-capable readiness. Instead, it required platforms to be capable of conducting basic missions, driving the procurement trend to be focused on acquiring large platforms.[111]

An F-35A Lightning II from the Japan Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF) 301st Tactical Fighter Squadron inside an Ordnance Loading Area (OLA) shelter at RAAF Base Tindal. Source: Australian Department of Defence

Japan has historically overlooked the procurement of spare parts and ammunition, a trend that dates back to the Cold War.[112] This tendency can largely be attributed to budgetary constraints, a perceived lack of urgency and a shared strategy established between Japan and the United States at the JSDF's inception, which tasked the JSDF with holding the line and enduring the fight until US reinforcements and military aid arrived.[113] This intentional division of roles was designed to maximise the alliance's effectiveness, with Japan prioritising immediate defensive operations while relying on United States support for sustained operations.

Therefore, between 1978 and 1981, one scenario projecting a Soviet invasion of Hokkaido set the ammunition stockpile target at only two weeks' worth.[114] Within this strategy, the role of the Japan Ground Self Defense Force (JGSDF) and Japan Air Self Defense Force (JASDF) primarily focused on halting invading forces to the greatest extent possible, while the Japan Maritime Self Defense Force (JMSDF) concentrated on securing nearby SLOCs. Protecting SLOCs was deemed critical to enable US carrier strike groups and supply ships to deliver reinforcements and war materiel.[115] In 1985, under US pressure, Japan made efforts to improve ammunition stockpiles and enhance the JSDF's ability to hold the frontlines for a longer period.[116] However, these measures achieved only limited success, largely because the Cold War ended just five years later, diminishing the perceived urgency for such preparations.

Should a war extend beyond Japan's sustainment capabilities, it has long been assumed by both Japanese and US thinkers that the United States would supplement the depleted equipment and ammunition, acting as the "arsenal of democracy" as it did throughout much of the 20th century. This notion is underpinned by the US strategic reserve of weapons, including armoured vehicles and aircraft, which were maintained in large stocks and provided to allies and partners during the Cold War. This premise is explicitly reflected in the 1978 and 1997 Guidelines for the Japan-US Defense Cooperation, which state that "the United States will support the acquisition of supplies for systems of US origin while Japan will support the acquisition of supplies in Japan."[117] Since most of Japan's high-end weapon systems were designed by the United States and used interoperable ammunition, this arrangement effectively ensured that Japan would rely on munitions and weapons supplied by its ally.

Since 2022, the Japanese Government has taken initial steps to enhance the JSDF's sustainment capabilities, informed by lessons from the conflict in Ukraine. The Ministry of Defense has announced plans to begin long-term storage of certain equipment, a process known as mothballing, starting in fiscal year 2025, to prepare for a protracted war. However, this initiative is extremely limited in scope, targeting only 30 Type 74 and Type 90 tanks, as well as the Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS).[118] Crucially, equipment essential for achieving naval and air superiority — such as surface combatants and aircraft — remains excluded from mothballing plans. As a result, the JSDF continues to face significant constraints in its ability to sustain operations during an extended conflict, hindered by long-standing premises in the strategic level planning.

Weakened "arsenal of democracy"

Even today, much of Japan's strategic community appears to operate under the assumption that the JSDF would rely on US equipment and ammunition in the event of a prolonged war. More concerningly, there seems to be little consideration of how Japan would sustain its operations after three months into the conflict. Publicly available tabletop exercises and government studies predominantly focus on the initial weeks of a war or the pre-war phase, leaving critical questions about long-term sustainability unanswered.[119] Japan's strategic community must grapple with whether the United States currently possesses sufficient stockpiles or the defence industrial base capacity to support both its own military operations and those of the JSDF during a protracted, high-intensity conflict in the Western Pacific.

Unfortunately, as many American strategists have correctly observed, the United States currently lacks the equipment and ammunition necessary to sustain its own military operations during a protracted war, let alone support allied militaries.[120] Although much of the data on US stockpiles remains undisclosed, think tank reports highlight critical gaps. For example, essential missiles like the Long Range Anti-Ship Missile (LRASM) are projected to be consumed at an alarmingly high rate, with supplies likely to last only a week in a high-intensity conflict.[121]

This severe decline in shipbuilding capacity undermines the United States' ability to regenerate its fleet in a meaningful timeframe during a high-intensity, prolonged conflict.

Other analyses reveal that while the US Navy would require approximately 2,000 anti-ship missiles to neutralise PLA naval forces in the first two months of a war, it only has around 1,000 missiles in stock.[122] This shortfall underscores the harsh reality that there would be minimal ammunition available for Japan in such a scenario.

As for equipment, the United States is likely to encounter significant challenges in sustaining a protracted maritime war. While thousands of vehicles are stored for long-term ground warfare, these assets will have little relevance in a conflict where maritime and air superiority are paramount. In terms of aircraft, the United States stores hundreds in the Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Group (AMARG) 'boneyard'. Many of these aircraft are classified under categories that allow them to be restored to airworthy conditions with varying levels of maintenance, ensuring some degree of readiness for air combat.[123]

However, the outlook for surface combatants is far less promising. According to the US Navy, fewer than 20 ships are currently held in reserve under the classifications of "out of commission in reserve" or "out of service in reserve."[124] Approximately half of these are Ticonderoga-class missile cruisers, which remain classified as reactivation candidates. Unfortunately, due to years of inadequate maintenance, many of these vessels are in poor condition and require substantial modernisation.[125] In addition, seven Littoral Combat Ships are also listed as reactivation candidates. While they remain seaworthy, their limited combat capabilities make them ill-suited for high-intensity maritime warfare. Even if these ships were successfully refurbished and recommissioned during a conflict, they would likely be prioritised for the US Navy rather than the JMSDF, as the United States would also need to regenerate its own fleet. This leaves the JMSDF with limited options for receiving equipment support from the United States during a protracted war.

Moreover, the timely delivery of equipment and ammunition cannot be assured, even if the United States were to mobilise its shipyards after the onset of war. US shipbuilding capacity dwindled to less than 0.5% of China's shipbuilding output and shrank by over 80% since the 1950s.[126] Additionally, the number of shipyards capable of constructing naval vessels has decreased from 11 during the Vietnam War to just four today.[127] This severe decline in capacity undermines the United States' ability to regenerate its fleet in a meaningful timeframe during a high-intensity, prolonged conflict. Furthermore, US naval shipbuilding has been plagued with delays of major surface and subsurface construction programs.[128] According to a report on a tabletop exercise that the House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party conducted, the time required to replace lost ships has become so long that it is unlikely to effectively impact the course of a prospective war.[129]

The US Congress' efforts to reform the shipbuilding sector through the *Shipbuilding and Harbor Infrastructure for Prosperity and Security for America Act* (*SHIPS Act*) represents a step in the right direction for addressing longstanding issues in the US shipbuilding industry.[130] This initiative, if successful, could strengthen the US Navy's capacity to expand and regenerate its fleet. However, these reforms are long overdue and face significant challenges in implementation, given the decades of neglect and reduced capacity in this sector.

Even if the *SHIPS Act* achieves its objectives, the time required to see tangible increases in ship production capacity will likely be too long to address immediate or near-term military needs. Moreover, it remains uncertain whether these reforms would yield sufficient capacity to not only meet the de-

mands of the US Navy but also provide substantial support to allies, including Japan, in a protracted conflict scenario.

This reality necessitates a critical reassessment by US maritime allies of their dependency on American equipment and ammunition in the event of a protracted war. Japan and even Australia should consider operating under the assumption that the United States will only be able to provide military aid on a much more limited scale than previously anticipated.

Japan's defence industry vulnerabilities

If the United States can no longer be relied upon to sustain protracted maritime conflicts, Japan must take steps to bolster its own defence industry capacity and capabilities. However, current indicators suggest this may be challenging. Japan's defence industry already faces acute capacity and supply-chain constraints even in peacetime. In response, the Ministry of Defense has introduced several initiatives aimed at reinforcing the defence industrial base, promoting the export of defence equipment, and enhancing technological foundations. These measures seek to strengthen supply chains and improve the operational capabilities of the JSDF.[131] While the defence sector appears to be making progress — evidenced by a defence-related sales increase of up to 25% at major companies from fiscal year 2023 to 2024 — these gains remain insufficient to fully meet the demands of a prolonged conflict.[132]

Despite current defence industry policies showing some success in producing domestically manufactured equipment, challenges persist for hardware produced under license from the United States. For example, Japan aims to double its annual production of PAC-3 missiles from 30 to 60 units to replenish stockpiles, but progress has stalled due to delays in receiving critical components from the United States.[133] Similar challenges extend to other missiles and equipment, complicating efforts to strengthen overall defence capability.[134] Moreover, under the US Defense Priorities and Allocations System (DPAS), Japan and other allies are required to wait until domestic US demand is met, further delaying the delivery of essential components.[135]

Capacity and supply chain issues are likely to worsen, as scaling up production requires significant time, and conflicts increase the risk of disruptions.[136] Even a single failure within the supply chain can halt production entirely. For example, the construction of JMSDF destroyers involves approximately 8,300 companies, many of which rely on specialised skills or equipment. Replacing these highly specialised firms is extremely difficult, underscoring the vulnerability of the current defence production system.[137]

As war drags on, the strategic importance of a nation's defence industrial base tends to rise, given its critical role in rebuilding forces. This naturally increases the risk of them being attacked by the enemy, further complicating the supply chain. Historically, Japanese industrial districts were among the primary targets of US air raids in the Second World War.[138] More recent examples, such as Ukraine's strikes on Russian shipyards to hinder the recovery of the Black Sea Fleet, further illustrate how disrupting an adversary's defence industrial base can significantly impact its ability to sustain military operations over the long term.[139]

Japan and even Australia should consider operating under the assumption that the United States will only be able to provide military aid on a much more limited scale than previously anticipated.

Despite the critical role of defence production, Japan's defence industrial base remains highly vulnerable and lacks robust protective measures. Nearly all of Japan's industrial areas are situated within a 1,000-kilometre radius of mainland China, with many concentrated in western Japan (Figure 1). Key shipyards for naval vessels — such as the Nagasaki Shipyard responsible for constructing the Mogami class frigates — are located only 750 kilometres from China. These facilities are relatively easy targets to strike for the PLA as they have around 3,000 missiles capable of reaching such targets (Table 1). Although Japan's defence industry facilities are unlikely to be the PLA's primary targets in the initial stages of a conflict, the risk of strikes against these facilities would likely increase as hostilities persist. In the event of a protracted conflict, sustained attacks on Japan's defence production infrastructure could significantly undermine the country's capacity to sustain military operations.[140]

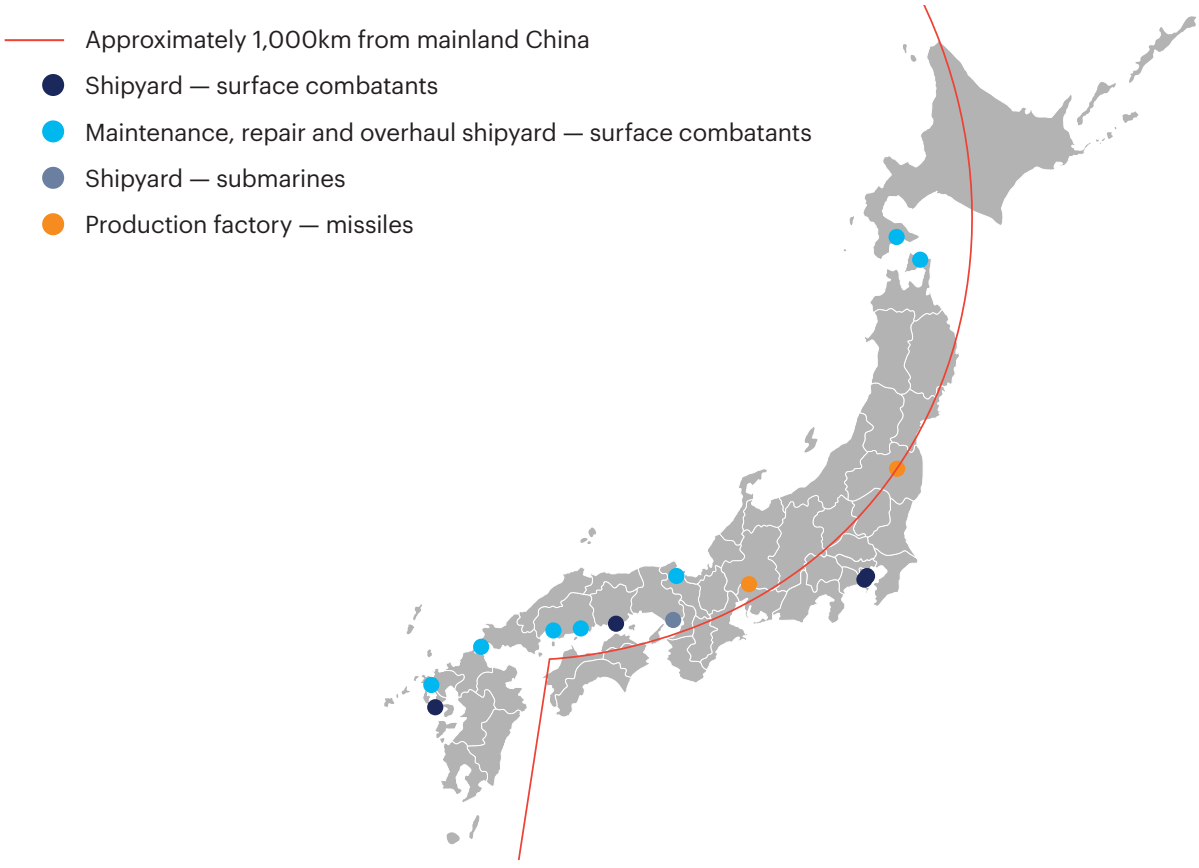
Table 1.

People's Liberation Army Rocket Force[141]

	Strike range	Missiles	Launchers
IRBM	3,000-5,500km	500	250
MRBM	1,000-3,000km	1,300	300
SRBM	300-1,000km	900	300
GLCM	>1,500km	400	150

Figure 1.

Location of major missile production factories and shipyards capable of building and servicing naval vessels



While the National Defense Strategy identifies the defence industrial base as "virtually a defense capability itself" and recognises its strategic value, the JSDF currently has no clear plans to defend key factories during wartime.[142] Unlike power plants and other civilian infrastructure, the JSDF does not treat the defence industry as a high-value asset.[143] Yet, even if defence industry capabilities are formally recognised as such, Japan's options for protecting them are limited. Active defence measures — such as integrated air and missile defence — offer a way to intercept airborne threats, but they can place a significant strain on the JSDF when ammunition stocks are low by pulling ammunition away from other high-priority missions.

Conversely, passive defence measures — such as dispersion, concealment and undergrounding — avoid these logistical challenges. However, while these methods may be feasible for small-scale factories that produce items like ammunition, they are nearly impossible to implement for platform repair and production facilities, including shipyards due to their physical size.[144] As a result, such large-scale industrial sites remain highly susceptible to attack.

Since the 1960s, Japan's defence community has recognised the inherent difficulty of sustaining a domestic defence industry during a large-scale conflict. As early as 1965, for instance, a National Defense College textbook for JSDF officers advised against crafting defence strategies that assume the stable wartime operation of defence industrial bases, citing Japan's limited strategic depth.[145] To enhance the JSDF's war sustainment capabilities, a fundamentally different approach to defence industry policy is required — one that critically re-examines the foundational assumptions of today's defence strategy.

The potential role of Australia

If support from the United States and domestic production can only provide a limited contribution compared to previous assumptions, the logical alternative is to seek supplemental assistance from like-minded countries. In this regard, the Australia-Japan special strategic partnership holds significant potential.[146] In the event of a major conflict in East Asia, such as a war over Taiwan or the Ryukyu Islands, Australia is highly likely to fight alongside Japan and the United States, making it one of Japan's most reliable partners.[147] Today, Japan and Australia have concluded various defence agreements, including the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) and the Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA), in addition to conducting command post exercises for high-intensity conflict.[148] These initiatives have further deepened the defence relationship between the two nations and increased their mutual reliance.

From Australia's perspective, it is equally critical for Japan, positioned on the frontline of defence, to maintain its combat effectiveness. Should Japan's capacity to sustain operations collapse, resulting in capitulation, Australia's SLOC to the continental United States and other regions would become highly vulnerable to the PLA, effectively isolating Australia and inflicting severe economic and strategic consequences.[149] A similar issue arose during the Second World War, although at that time it was Japan that posed a threat to Australia's SLOC.

Historically, Australia has capitalised on its geographic advantages to serve as a logistical hub for both the US military and the British Royal Navy. During the Second World War, for instance, Australia provided critical support for US operations in the Pacific. Before Pearl Harbor recovered from the December 1941 attack, damaged vessels travelled to Australia for repairs instead of the continental United States, significantly reducing turnaround time.[150] Sydney's docks, in particular, provided vital support to the Australian, British, American, Dutch and French fleets, while Australian shipyards collectively serviced nearly 2,000 merchant vessels operating in the South-West Pacific Area.[151] Recognising this strategic value, the Australian Government constructed Captain Cook's Graving Dock on Garden Island, which notably repaired the British aircraft carrier HMS Illustrious en route to the invasion of Okinawa.[152] Given these precedents, Australia retains the potential to fulfil a similarly critical role in future conflicts.

In a hypothetical major-power conflict in the Indo-Pacific, Australia's strategic depth provides itself with a measure of protection, reducing its likelihood of being directly targeted by missile attacks or other forms of aggression.[153] While Australia is no longer entirely shielded by geography due to advancements and proliferation in military technology that allow adversaries to project power over greater distances, the country's geological traits still offer a relative degree of safety, as the Australian 2023 Defence Strategic Review notes.[154]

Australia's AUD$157 billion investment in its shipbuilding industrial base under the Continuous Naval Shipbuilding and Sustainment (CNSS) program significantly increases its value to allies in a protracted war.[155] According to the 2024 Integrated Investment Plan, the Department of Defence plans to introduce six Hunter-class anti-submarine frigates, 11 general-purpose frigates — with the Upgraded Mogami class as one of two contenders — and six Large Optionally Crewed Surface Vessels (LOSVs). These acquisitions will expand Australia's fleet of large surface combatants from nine to 26 as well as its shipbuilding capacity.[156] To support this ambitious buildup, the Australian Government is investing in workforce upskilling through vocational programs, expanding infrastructure in Osborne and Henderson and strengthening the defence supply chain.[157]

Beyond naval shipbuilding, Australia's broader defence industrial strategy is also undergoing significant development. In 2024, the Albanese government introduced the Defence Industry Development Strategy, outlining seven Sovereign Defence Industrial Priorities (SDIPs) to guide investment in critical capabilities. These priorities include Maintenance, Repair, Overhaul, and Upgrade (MRO&U) of aircrafts; continuous naval shipbuilding and sustainment; sustainment and enhancement of the combined-arms land system; domestic manufacturing of missiles and ammunitions; development and integration of autonomous systems; integration and enhancement of battlespace awareness and management systems; test and evaluation, certification and system assurance.[158]

Deep bilateral cooperation in the defence industry is not without significant challenges. Notably, Japan has never exported highly integrated and complex weapons systems, leaving it with limited experience in this area. Additionally, Japan's defence industry and shipyards are already strained by a shortage of skilled workers — a challenge that will likely become even more pressing if the Japanese-designed frigate is selected for construction at the Henderson Shipyard.[159] In such a scenario, many Japanese contractors would need to travel to Australia to provide technical support, further stretching available manpower. The Australian defence industry is also not without hardships. It lacks the capability to rapidly construct naval vessels and has limited capacity to scale up production, as evidenced by delays in the Hunter-class program. Additionally, the Royal Australian Navy's unpredictable defence procurement forecasts have made it difficult for shipbuilders to sustain long-term operations.[160]

However, recent initiatives underscore Australia's commitment to strengthening its defence industrial base, positioning it as a valuable partner for Japan. By investing in and leveraging Australia's growing capabilities, Japan could benefit from the repair, replenishment and refurbishment of its surface combatants during a protracted maritime conflict. Taken together, these developments suggest that Australia is well-positioned to complement Japan's weaknesses while simultaneously strengthening its defence industry and strategic interests.

Policy recommendations

Australia's strategic depth grants Japan access to defence industry bases that are relatively protected from the PLA's long-range fires, mitigating one of Japan's primary vulnerabilities while simultaneously safeguarding Australia's continental defence and SLOCs. Moreover, this cooperation can proceed without a formal treaty, offering both governments an opportunity to strengthen ties while reducing the risks of becoming overly entangled with one another. Existing frameworks, such as the 2014 agreement on defence equipment and technology transfers, could effectively facilitate this arrangement as in essence, this cooperation is a partnership in the defence industry.[161]

Australia supporting Japan with equipment and ammunition also aligns with Australia's current defence industry strategy and naval shipbuilding and sustainment plan. Australia currently aims to uplift the capacity, productivity and resilience of its shipbuilding industry to generate ongoing economic, export and employment opportunities for decades to come.[162] Cooperation with Japan creates the potential for consistent surface fleet sustainment demand.[163]

To achieve this strategic objective, the two countries should focus on the following course of action. First, bilateral cooperation should prioritise developing Australian shipyards with the capability and capacity to maintain, repair and overhaul Japanese destroyers. A promising opportunity lies in the Royal Australian Navy's SEA 3000 project, which has

shortlisted Mitsubishi Heavy Industry's Upgraded Mogami class and the German-designed TKMS MEKO A-200.[164] Selecting the Japanese contender would enable Henderson's consolidated shipyard in Western Australia to gain in-depth knowledge of the vessel and stock critical components, including weapon systems and power units, fostering long-term support and operational synergy. In fact, the Japanese Government stated that one of its three rationales for joining the SEA 3000 enterprise is to "strengthen the naval shipbuilding and maintenance industry base in the Indo-Pacific region."[165]

Even if the Upgraded Mogami class is not ultimately chosen, meaningful collaboration could still be pursued through mechanisms akin to a US-Japan Defense Industrial Cooperation, Acquisition, and Sustainment (DICAS) agreement between the two nations.[166] This framework, which enables Japanese defence industries to service US naval vessels and deepen cooperation, could be studied for potential implementation in Japan-Australia relations. Moreover, there is already groundwork for the proposed cooperation since Japanese and Australian navies operate common components. For example, both the Upgraded Mogami class and the Hunter class employ MT30 gas turbines, along with Mk. 41 vertical launch systems, close-in weapon systems and Mk. 45 naval gun systems.[167] Japanese Aegis destroyers such as Kongo, Atago and Maya class also operate near-identical combat systems to the Australian Hobart class destroyers.[168] This commonality would ease the burden on Australian shipyards when repairing Japanese vessels, as they already possess the technical expertise to service these systems.

Second, Japan and Australia must prepare themselves to adapt rapidly in a protracted war by studying scenarios where many allied surface combatants are damaged or sunk. The two navies will need to conduct research on how they would fight after most of their current fleet becomes neutralised. One promising area for partnership lies in designing large, unmanned surface vehicles (USVs) capable of launching long-range strike missiles.[169] Australia's Navy plans to introduce six LOSVs equipped with vertical launch systems, while Japan is currently researching multi-purpose combat-support USVs that feature submersible capabilities.[170] By aligning these initiatives, both nations can enhance interoperability and create rapidly producible vessels to offset combat losses during a protracted conflict.

Third, Japan and Australia must engage the United States through frameworks such as the Trilateral Defence Consultation to emphasise the critical importance of allied sustainment capabilities in a protracted war and seek US cooperation in strengthening them. For example, the United States could support Australia by helping to maintain and expand its shipyard capacity. The US Navy already plans to repair certain surface combatants in Japanese shipyards through DICAS.[171] Extending similar practices to Australia could yield substantial benefits.[172] Even a small number of US Navy vessels undergoing peacetime repairs in Australian shipyards could help sustain the local workforce and lower barriers to swiftly scaling up capacity in times of crisis.

Furthermore, Japan and Australia should persuade the United States to leverage Australia's defence industry to introduce greater redundancy into its global supply chain, particularly for parts and components where US-based companies currently serve as bottlenecks. Today, multiple American defence firms operate as prime contractors in Australia, alongside hundreds of small and medium Australian enterprises that supply components to the US-led global defence supply chain.[173] Expanding Australia's production capacity for these critical items would significantly enhance supply chain resilience, ensuring that Japan and other US allies can acquire essential parts with shorter delays. This, in turn, would reinforce the alliance's overall warfighting capability and strategic preparedness.

Conclusion: Deepened defence cooperation

Although bilateral defence industry cooperation cannot fully address the challenges of reinforcing Japan's 'sustainability and resiliency' in a protracted war, it still has the potential to significantly complement existing weaknesses and bolster deterrence.

Enhancing Australia's defence industrial base with an eye to include support for Japan's capacity in a protracted war would significantly strengthen the overall defence posture of both nations. As Japan and Australia deepen their defence cooperation, they should critically re-examine the assumption of their defence strategy and seek new solutions together.

SECTION TWO

Strategic collaboration

The path to an Australia-Japan 'complementary' relationship in Pacific Island countries: From development to economic security cooperation

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Executive summary

- Strategically located along the sea lanes connecting Australia and Japan, Pacific Island countries have become geopolitically important, prompting increased aid from both countries amid China's competitive presence in the region.
- Australia's development support through the 'Pacific Step-Up' initiative and Japan's steadily increasing ODA to Pacific Island nations demonstrate their commitment to the region, but complementary cooperation is essential to maximising impact.
- The Trilateral Infrastructure Partnership between Japan, Australia and the United States sets a foundation for future security collaborations in other regions by enhancing infrastructure development and digital connectivity in Pacific Island countries through public-private partnerships, addressing regional needs while countering China's influence.
- Yet, China's expanding presence in the Pacific Islands — fuelled by the Belt and Road Initiative and its maritime interests — involving intensified diplomatic engagement, resource development and digital infrastructure projects creates substantial challenges for Australia and Japan as they seek to maintain their influence and address security concerns in the region.
- Additionally, economic constraints from the geographical isolation of the Pacific Islands, vulnerabilities to climate change, persistent corruption, governance issues and high entry barriers for private investment in the region continue to be challenges to deepening engagement.
- To strengthen engagement and the stability of the Pacific, Australia and Japan must leverage their complementary strengths — Australia's development support and Japan's technical expertise in the private sector.

Key policy recommendations

To advance Australia-Japan economic security cooperation in Pacific Island countries:

- The Japanese government should dispatch a science and technology fellow to the Japanese Embassy in Australia. This would strengthen bilateral collaboration in critical areas such as telecommunications, infrastructure and economic security. In an era where science, technology, and security are increasingly interconnected, a partnership between Japan and Australia in the field of science and technology presents a valuable opportunity to address the vulnerabilities in digital infrastructure faced by Pacific Island nations.
- The Japanese government should identify startups eager to enter Pacific Island markets and provide institutional support to Japanese business expansion. The agility and rapid decision-making capabilities that define startups could also be effectively leveraged in Pacific Island nations to foster sustainable solutions and innovation.
- Japan and Australia should create a framework through which the Australian Government can collaborate with Japanese startups on addressing economic security initiatives in the Pacific. Creating a channel for direct communication between Japanese private enterprises and the Australian Government will allow for the faster development of joint initiatives, project formation and strengthened engagement in the Pacific region. Aligning with Japan's broader interests on private-sector engagement with developing countries, this approach benefits both Japan and Australia in enhancing their contributions to the Pacific region.

Signage for a foreign investor's residential project in Honiara in the Solomon Islands, April 2024. Source: Getty

Introduction

The cooperative relationship between Japan and Australia is deepening. Both countries value the rule of law and democracy, and they share many geopolitical challenges. As neighbouring nations to Pacific Island countries, Japan and Australia share common interests in regional security and prosperity, including assisting regional partners in achieving those goals. Pacific Island nations tend to be small in terms of area, population, and economic scale, with their islands scattered across vast distances. As a result, transportation costs are high, and each country's market is relatively limited. These nations are largely dependent on primary industries like agriculture and fishing, and their geographic conditions make them particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Due to the fragility of their domestic economic bases and the threats posed by climate change, many of these countries rely on foreign assistance to meet their national needs. Geopolitically, however, they occupy a strategically important position along the sea lanes connecting Japan and Australia, giving their economic assistance efforts a degree of geopolitical significance.

This paper examines the new forms of economic security cooperation that Japan and Australia are implementing in Pacific Island countries. Considering the geopolitical dynamics surrounding these nations and the limited impact that unilateral support from either Japan or Australia can have in isolation, the paper presents three policy recommendations. Finally, this analysis explores the Australia-Japan complementary relationship in addressing economic security challenges in the Pacific region.

Australian and Japanese approaches to economic security in the Pacific Islands

Australia's already significant development support for Pacific Island nations has only become more pronounced since the late 2010s. In 2018, then-Prime Minister Scott Morrison described this shift, known as the 'Pacific Step-Up', as a "new chapter in relations with our Pacific family."[174] As part of this initiative, Australia established five new diplomatic missions across the Pacific region and created the Office of the Pacific within the DFAT. By 2022, Australia's bilateral Official Development Assistance (ODA) budget to the Pacific accounted for approximately 40% of the aid program.[175] Overall, there was an increase of more than 7% in aid from 2022 to 2023. Historically, Australia's development assistance primarily focused on supporting social infrastructure, such as water, sanitation, and education, with a strong emphasis on fostering deeper connections between people.[176] In the realm of development, a major driving factor behind Australia's heightened focus on the Pacific region is the geopolitical landscape, particularly the growing security risks associated with China's expanding presence.[177] This underscores the strategic importance of the Pacific for Australia's long-term stability and regional influence.

Japan is now the second-largest contributor to Pacific Island nations after Australia, steadily increasing its ODA and expanding infrastructure support. While Japan's ODA to the Pacific was less than 2% of its total aid in the 2010s, it surpassed 3% in 2021, reflecting a growing focus on the region. Through their aid, Japan supports critical and economic infrastructure, fostering sustainable development and resilience.[178] A key aspect of Japan's engagement is its emphasis on public-private partnership (PPP) projects, which facilitate social development and technology transfer. Japan has successfully introduced advanced digital infrastructure elsewhere, such as implementing NEC's facial recognition technology at major airports in Kenya and Rwanda to enhance border security.[179] These efforts showcase Japan's ability to export technology to address local challenges.

Beyond development aid, economic security cooperation is becoming increasingly important. With rising competition from China, Japan is refining its approach to regional engagement by integrating science and technology diplomacy into its aid strategy. The Japan-Australia partnership plays a crucial role in strengthening Pacific Island nations by leveraging each country's strengths. Moving forward, Japan's approach will focus on flexible, complementary cooperation in economic security while deepening its engagement in infrastructure and digital projects. Through these efforts, Japan not only complements Australia's leadership but also reinforces regional stability and prosperity.

Trilateral cooperation with the United States

Beyond Japan and Australia's bilateral support for Pacific Island countries, significant developments have also occurred involving the United States, which also has deep ties with the region. In 2018, the three nations announced the Trilateral Infrastructure Partnership to mobilise private capital for enhancing digital connectivity and energy infrastructure in the Pacific Islands. Australia is represented by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and Export Finance Australia (formerly Export Finance and Insurance Corporation: EFIC), Japan by the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC), and the United States by the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) as their respective points of contact. The first project under this partnership was the approval of a submarine cable project in Palau in 2021, with NEC — a Japanese company known for its expertise in submarine cables — to support the region's telecommunications infrastructure.[180] NEC is a world-leading supplier of submarine cables and, together with SubCom (US) and Alcatel Submarine Networks (France), holds over 90% of the global market for submarine cable construction.[181] Such public-private partnership (PPP) projects have been utilised as a means for Japan to address the evolving needs of various regions. In the digital sector, Japan collaborates with NEC and international organisations. One example is a project where a Japanese company implemented a facial recognition digital system at an international airport in Kenya. This initiative has allowed Japan to leverage the technology and expertise of its private sector.

Prior to the Trilateral Infrastructure Partnership, Japan and the United States signed a bilateral memorandum of understanding in 2017 to cooperate on infrastructure development and energy projects in developing countries. Developing countries include regions such as Asia, the Indo-Pacific, the Middle East, and Africa; and supporting these projects has contributed to strengthening economic relations between Japan and the United States.[182] In early 2018, a similar memorandum of understanding was signed between the United States and Australia.[183]

Since the trilateral partnership was established, each country continued to strengthen its capacity. In October 2019, the US International Development Finance Corporation (USDFC), a new organisation that succeeded OPIC, was launched. By enhancing the United States' development finance capabilities and mobilising private capital, it becomes possible to increase the flexibility of investments in developing countries. In 2019, Australia amended its legislation to grant Export Finance Australia (formerly EFIC) the authority to provide overseas infrastructure financing. This significantly expanded its mandate beyond its traditional mission of supporting Australian exports.[184] The framework established by Japan, the United States, and Australia to support Pacific Island nations across the public and private sectors has set a precedent for future security cooperation in other third countries. At the same time, the existence of the partnership among the three countries and their projects serves as a countermeasure to China's growing presence in Pacific Islands nations. From the perspective of highlighting joint projects between Japan, the United States and Australia, joint missions were dispatched to Papua New Guinea in April 2019 and to Indonesia in August of the same year, with intergovernmental meetings held in each country. The framework of support by the three countries, drawing on examples from Pacific Island nations, is beginning to expand across Asia.

China's growing economic influence in the Pacific Islands

Since the 2010s, following the transition to the Xi Jinping administration, China's presence in the Pacific Island nations has been growing rapidly. This surge in influence is driven by China's goal of maximising its maritime national interests. A key component of this strategy is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a large-scale infrastructure and economic project that spans over 60 countries across land and sea corridors, connecting China to Europe and Africa. Although the Pacific Island nations do not fall neatly into the traditional framework of the BRI, they hold strategic importance in the geopolitical and political spheres. The BRI has been interpreted in various ways — some view it as an effort by China to expand its global influence and assert leadership on the world stage, while others see it as a means for China to address domestic issues, such as resolving excess industrial capacity by involving other

nations in large-scale projects.[185] Regardless of the interpretation, the Pacific Island nations have long been influenced by Australia and the United States. As a result, China's growing presence in the region poses a significant challenge to the maritime security interests of both countries.

In its pursuit of maximising national interests, China has been exerting influence across a wide range of areas, from diplomacy and economics to security, to sway the Pacific Island nations. One notable aspect of this strategy is the increasing diplomatic pressure China is applying on the relationships between Pacific Island nations and Taiwan. A clear example of this occurred in 2019 when the Solomon Islands and Kiribati severed their diplomatic ties with Taiwan in favour of establishing official relations with China. In early 2024, Nauru announced that it would cut off its nearly two-decade-long diplomatic relationship with Taiwan and shift to a formal recognition of China. Beyond diplomacy, China is also heavily involved in resource development in the Pacific Island region, tapping into the abundant natural resources these nations possess, such as timber, minerals, and marine products. By expanding its footprint in resource extraction and economic cooperation, China is steadily deepening its ties with these countries, further reinforcing its influence in the region. For example, in Papua New Guinea, China oversees the development of nickel mines, while Chinese-affiliated companies are engaged in large-scale mining operations, logging of timber forests, and extensive fishing activities.[186] Despite a general decline in China's development assistance to Pacific Island nations since 2016, this trend is largely attributed to domestic issues such as debt concerns.[187] Nevertheless, China's presence in the region remains significant, particularly through economic support exemplified by foreign direct investment (FDI) and security cooperation.

China's expansion into the Pacific Island nations is also evident in digital infrastructure. One of the most prominent examples is the involvement of Huawei, a leading Chinese telecommunications company, in promoting and installing network systems across the region. In 2010, Huawei was reported to have participated in projects related to the development of Integrated Government Information Systems (IGIS) in both Papua New Guinea and Australia, highlighting its early engagement in shaping governmental digital frameworks.[188] Building on this, in 2022, the Solomon Islands Government received a loan of A$96 million from China to construct 161 mobile communication towers, with Huawei taking the construction lead.[189] This marked the first instance of a Chinese loan to the Pacific Island nation after it shifted diplomatic relations from Taiwan to China.[190] Huawei's ongoing involvement in digital infrastructure underscores China's broader ambitions to establish a lasting technological footprint in the region, further deepening its strategic presence across critical sectors. This development highlighted Huawei's expanding role in the Pacific's digital infrastructure.

As China's presence in the Pacific Island nations grows, mobile communication towers serve not only to enhance communication infrastructure and ensure stable connectivity but also to impact national security through the transmission of data. The expansion of such infrastructure highlights how telecommunications can play a dual role, both as a facilitator of economic development and as a strategic asset with significant security implications. These developments illustrate that Australia's influence in the Pacific is increasingly challenged by China's rising dominance. However, the implications extend beyond Australia. For Japan and the United States, both of which have long-standing relationships with Pacific Island nations, this emerging dynamic represents a shared concern from the perspective of economic security.

As China's presence in the Pacific Island nations grows, mobile communication towers serve not only to enhance communication infrastructure and ensure stable connectivity but also to impact national security through the transmission of data.

Common challenges to realising a shared agenda

For both Australia and Japan, deepening their engagement with Pacific Island nations comes with a range of challenges, particularly in the areas of economic development, geographical constraints, structural vulnerabilities, and political stability.

One of the most pressing challenges is the inherent 'Islandness' of Pacific Island nations, which presents structural barriers to economic growth. These countries are characterised by small populations and geographical isolation, making it difficult to establish profitable and sustainable markets. Limited connectivity between islands further exacerbates these economic constraints, restricting trade opportunities and increasing dependency on external support. A particularly pressing issue is the difficulty faced by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in integrating into global value chains.[191] Due to limitations in labour productivity and challenges in meeting international quality certification standards, many local businesses struggle to participate in the increasingly interconnected global economy. The inability to engage in expanding global value chains not only restricts trade opportunities but also contributes to sluggish economic growth, making long-term development a persistent challenge for the region.

Pacific Island nations are among the most vulnerable countries to the impacts of climate change, facing significant environmental and economic challenges as a result. At the United Nations General Assembly in September 2024, Vanuatu's Prime Minister, Charlot Salwai Tabimasmas, emphasised the dire consequences of ongoing carbon emissions, stating that if current levels of emissions persist, Vanuatu's ability to maintain its status as a developing country would be nearly impossible.[192] This statement underscores the urgent need for stronger international action to address climate-related threats in the Pacific region. One of the most immediate and severe consequences of climate change is rising sea levels, which directly threaten the livelihoods of people living on low-lying islands. Many Pacific Island nations consist of small, scattered islands, making them particularly susceptible to climate-induced disasters such as cyclones, storm surges, and coastal erosion. These disasters not only pose risks to human settlements and infrastructure but also have devastating effects on agriculture, which remains a critical sector for food security and economic stability in the region.

Corruption remains a significant challenge to governance transparency in Pacific Island nations, affecting both domestic economic growth and the ability to attract foreign investment. Weak institutional frameworks limited regulatory oversight, and deeply ingrained socio-cultural practices have contributed to persistent issues of corruption, creating barriers to sustainable development and good governance. For instance, in 2017, the Solomon Islands faced a high-profile corruption case involving the Ministry of Infrastructure Development, where contracts were allegedly awarded to a company owned by the family of a government official.[193] Similarly, during the 2018 national elections, reports emerged of politicians engaging in vote-buying, further undermining democratic processes and public trust in the electoral system.[194] These incidents highlight the systemic nature of corruption in some Pacific Island nations and the urgent need for stronger governance mechanisms to ensure accountability and transparency. Traditional cultural practices also play a significant role in the Pacific. In Papua New Guinea, the 'Wantok System' — a social structure based on kinship, common ancestry, and regional ties — has both positive and negative implications. While it fosters strong community bonds and mutual support, it can also contribute to nepotism, favouritism, and a lack of merit-based decision-making in both the public and private sectors. Given Papua New Guinea's highly diverse linguistic and ethnic composition, corruption has been particularly concerning in sectors such as logging and government procurement.

These factors create significant hurdles that must be carefully navigated to foster sustainable and mutually beneficial relationships. For Japanese private enterprises, the Pacific Islands present challenges due to their small populations and geographic isolation, in addition to the above challenges, making it difficult to establish a profitable market and entry barriers to these markets remain high.

For Australia, the primary destinations for FDI are the United States and the United Kingdom, which together account for 50% of the total. These are followed by European countries, Japan, and Southeast Asian nations. Among Australia's top 20 FDI destinations, Papua New Guinea is the only Pacific

Vanuatu's Prime Minister Charlot Salwai Tabimasmas speaks during the 79th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, September 2024. Source: Getty

Island nation, with a share of 0.7% as of 2023.[195] In Australia, it can be observed that capital movement with Pacific Island nations is not particularly active in economic terms. For Australia as well, the economic incentives toward the Pacific Island countries appear relatively low compared to other regions in terms of the share of FDI, and the barriers to private sector entry seem high.

Recommendations

To strengthen not only bilateral cooperation between Japan and Australia but also the stability of Pacific Island nations, both countries should leverage their respective strengths — Australia's financial capacity, which prioritises development support for the Pacific, and Japan's technological expertise in the private sector. To advance economic security cooperation projects in a timely manner, three policy recommendations should be considered:

1. Establishing a diplomatic liaison for science and technology in Australia

Japan can enhance its science and technology communication and cooperation with Australia by dispatching a science and technology fellow to the Japanese Embassy in Australia following the initiative launched in 2023. Science and technology fellows are currently assigned to six diplomatic missions (the European Union, India, Israel, Sweden, the United States, and the United Kingdom) and serve as liaisons with local researchers and institutions.[196] Their role also includes promoting Japan's scientific capabilities. By appointing a fellow in Australia, Japan can bolster expertise in areas such as telecommunications infrastructure and economic security. A key advantage for Japan is its ability to accelerate partnership on multiple levels among public-private partnership schemes, Japan-Australia bilateral partnership and Japan-US-Australia trilateral partnership for digital infrastructure related to economic security and information sharing.

In Japan, there is a growing focus on the intersection of science and technology policy with national security, reflecting a broader global trend of integrating advanced scientific research with economic security. As scientific and technological advancements become increasingly linked to national interests, Japan has begun emphasising collaboration in fields such as cutting-edge technology and economic security, recognising their strategic importance.

The Japanese Government formulates a Science, Technology, and Innovation Basic Plan every five years to provide a structured and consistent framework for advancing its science and technology policy. The current policy, known as the 6th Science, Technology, and Innovation Basic Plan, was launched in 2021 and is designed to implement a long-term, systematic approach to scientific and technological development.[197] As the country prepares for the next phase beyond 2026, discussions regarding the framework of the new plan are underway, with particular attention given to the integration of economic security considerations. By the end of 2024, policymakers were expected to address this issue as a key agenda item in shaping the upcoming strategy.[198] One of the driving forces behind this shift is the increasing global alignment of security policies with science and technology, as major countries recognise the critical role that technological superiority plays in national defence and economic resilience. Additionally, Japan's declining presence in advanced technology and research capabilities has raised concerns about its long-term competitiveness. This awareness has become a fundamental factor in shaping the overall direction of the country's next science and technology policy.

Traditionally, Japan-Australia trade has been centred on Japan importing key resources such as coal and iron ore, as well as agricultural products like meat and wheat from Australia. In an era where science, technology, and security are increasingly interconnected, collaboration between Japan and Australia in the field of science and technology presents a valuable opportunity to address the vulnerabilities in digital infrastructure faced by Pacific Island nations. Japan can collaborate on the technological needs and economic security trends of Pacific Island nations by being on the Australian side. This is because, in many organisations, including Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pacific Island nations are often grouped together with Australia as part of the same region, and information between Australia and these nations is closely linked. Therefore, gathering information through Australia as a hub is also an efficient approach for Japanese organisations. Given this evolving landscape, establishing a dedicated framework for science and technology diplomacy between Japan and Australia would not only strengthen economic security but also enhance bilateral cooperation in technological innovation. By creating mechanisms for deeper engagement, Japan can provide a platform for both governments and industries to work together, fostering a multilayered relationship that spans various stakeholders — from policymakers to businesses.

2. Identifying Japanese startups eager to enter Pacific Island markets and strengthening domestic institutional collaboration

Against the backdrop of an increasingly complex international landscape, the G7 Hiroshima Summit held in May 2023 highlighted Japan's commitment to strengthening cooperation with Global South nations.[199] Notably, Japan emphasised the importance of not only traditional ODA but also fostering partnerships with private-sector startups as a key avenue for deeper engagement.

Japanese startups have traditionally expanded into East Asia and Africa, driven by expectations of future population growth and economic expansion. However, the agility and rapid decision-making capabilities that define startups could also be effectively leveraged in Pacific Island nations. Furthermore, given that both Japan and the Pacific Island nations share the common characteristic of being island nations, there is significant potential for Japanese startups to contribute solutions to pressing challenges in the Pacific, such as climate change and natural disaster resilience. In particular, Japan's experience in tackling its own social and environmental challenges can serve as a valuable asset when addressing similar issues in the Pacific region. By capitalising on expertise developed domestically, Japanese startups can play a meaningful role in fostering sustainable solutions and innovation in Pacific Island nations.

In 2023, Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry (METI) took the lead in organising a support event in Tokyo aimed at facilitating business

development focused on solving social challenges in Pacific Island nations. The event provided valuable insights into business and investment opportunities in the region, offering advisory services and networking opportunities with relevant Pacific Island-related institutions based in Tokyo. Following this initiative, METI launched an open call for companies interested in expanding into Pacific Island nations, leading to the dispatch of selected firms to the region. Furthermore, a business matching event was set to be held in the latter half of 2024. This marks the first time METI has undertaken a business support initiative for Pacific Island nations, providing financial assistance to companies as part of a broader effort to strengthen economic ties with Global South nations. Similarly, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has been actively promoting startup collaboration in the Global South by organising events targeted at Japanese businesses and entrepreneurs. Although JICA operates as an independent administrative institution under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), strengthening cross-agency collaboration — such as between JICA, MOFA and METI — remains essential for effective information sharing and coordination.

3. Facilitating collaboration between discovered startups and the Australian Government

Once Japan and Australia have established a strong foundation for collaboration in science and technology and Japan has put in place a robust support system for startups and enterprises interested in expanding into Pacific Island nations, the next critical step is to ensure that Japanese startups can engage with the Australian Government in preparation for economic security concerns. Beyond government-level coordination between Japan and Australia, it is also essential to create channels through which the Australian Government and private sector can connect with Japanese businesses when specific areas of interest arise. Such a framework would enable the rapid development of joint initiatives. Particularly in the case of technology and infrastructure support for Pacific Island nations — where both Japan and Australia share economic security interests — there is potential for projects that extend beyond government collaboration. These could involve direct engagement between the Australian Government and Japanese private enterprises, allowing for the co-development of initiatives that align with both nations' strategic priorities. In such instances, providing the Australian side with access to relevant information about Japanese private companies would facilitate project formation and strengthen Australia's engagement in the Pacific region. By establishing a framework where Japanese companies can collaborate with the Australian Government to provide technological support to Pacific Island nations, Japan can align its efforts with its broader policy of promoting private-sector engagement with Global South nations. This approach not only benefits Australia's strategic interests but also creates significant opportunities for Japan, reinforcing a mutually beneficial partnership that enhances both countries' degree of contributions in the Pacific region.

At the Japan-Australia level, collaborative efforts in science and technology are already underway. In 2024, the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization (CSIRO), Australia's national research institution, and Japan's Panasonic initiated joint research to establish the development of nickel laterite processing technologies.[200] This partnership aims to enhance the utilisation of Australia's nickel resources while developing cost-effective, environmentally friendly raw materials and building a more resilient supply chain.[201] By leveraging cross-border cooperation between government and private sector entities, Japan and Australia are demonstrating their ability to drive technological advancements together. Given these successful precedents, expanding such collaboration to third-party countries is certainly feasible.

For Japan-Australia collaboration to be effectively implemented in third countries, it is essential to create mechanisms that allow stakeholders from various sectors to connect quickly when needed. One practical approach would be for Japan to maintain and share with Australia a list of companies interested in engaging with Pacific Island nations. Additionally, proactively identifying businesses with an interest in economic security and the technologies they can offer would help expedite the matching process. By reducing the time required for project formation, this strategy would facilitate a more agile and responsive Japan-Australia partnership in supporting developing countries, particularly in the Pacific region.

Conclusion: A new partnership for Japan and Australia

In conclusion, the Japan-Australia relationship, influenced by changes in the international landscape, is evolving beyond direct bilateral ties and deepening around the development of Pacific Island nations. These nations serve as critical sea lanes connecting Japan and Australia, making them highly significant. The scope of this deepening relationship has expanded from traditional development cooperation to economic security in response to the evolving geopolitical dynamics surrounding the Pacific. In Pacific Island nations, Japan and Australia have each leveraged their strengths in development cooperation and adapted their internal governmental authorities to meet various local needs. However, as China expands its support for these nations, not only has development cooperation become a key issue, but China's assistance in digital infrastructure — impacting the economic security of both Japan and Australia — has also increased. In particular, Australia has grown increasingly concerned over security and telecommunications risks following Huawei's involvement in network system deployment. Meanwhile, Japan has started to go beyond traditional infrastructure support, such as roads and bridges, by advancing digital technology assistance, utilising its technological expertise to contribute to overseas development. For Japanese companies, challenges such as supply chain limitations, small market size, and governance issues have hindered investment appeal in the Pacific Island region. On the Australian side, foreign direct investment (FDI) remains heavily concentrated in the United States and the United Kingdom, posing economic investment challenges. Given these factors, Japan and Australia must seek collaboration by utilising their limited resources to ensure regional stability and economic security. The 2018 'Trilateral Infrastructure Partnership' involving Japan, Australia and the United States was a prime example of cooperation that made the most of limited resources and each country's unique capabilities. Japan provided technologies that Australia lacked, while Australia contributed resources unavailable to Japan, forming a complementary relationship. This model serves as a key example of how the two nations can address shared geopolitical challenges. Furthermore, establishing a framework for science and technology diplomacy, identifying startups aiming to enter the Pacific Island market, and fostering collaboration between these startups and Australia are crucial steps in strengthening this complementary relationship.

In an era of rapid change driven by political shifts and technological advancements, Japan and Australia can enhance their contribution to regional stability and peace by forging a new complementary partnership.

In an era of rapid change driven by political shifts and technological advancements, Japan and Australia can enhance their contribution to regional stability and peace by forging a new complementary partnership.

Strengthening Japanese and Australian intelligence cooperation: A necessity for deterrence of conflict in the Indo-Pacific

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Executive summary

- Japan and Australia face the most complex and challenging strategic environment since the end of the Second World War.[202] The deliberate erosion of regional norms and institutions by the People's Republic of China (PRC) presents an existential threat to the security and economic prosperity of both Japan and Australia.
- Japan and Australia are Special Strategic Partners and have a shared unwavering commitment to upholding the rules-based global order. Australia views Japan as the country with which it is most strategically aligned.[203] Deterrence of conflict in the Indo-Pacific has become a priority objective of the Australia-Japan partnership.
- Collaborative intelligence collection and analysis provide the best means to understand if the deterrence strategy being collectively enacted is effective, yet Japan and Australia's intelligence cooperation is a lagging component of the security cooperation agenda, particularly when compared with advances in broader defence cooperation.[204]
- Three key barriers must be overcome to achieve expanded intelligence sharing between Japan and Australia to ensure effective deterrence of conflict in the Indo-Pacific, including:
  1. The security of shared intelligence given shortcomings in cybersecurity and clearance/vetting systems.
  2. Language capability to facilitate shared strategic assessments.
  3. The political appetite to achieve the necessary legislative reforms in support of expanded cooperation.
- Further progress can be made in overcoming these obstacles, which remain surmountable, through concerted effort from both nations; particularly if both Intelligence Communities share lessons learned to expedite the process.
- If expanded intelligence cooperation were realised, the benefits for Japan and Australia would be significant. Australian decision-makers could benefit from access to the collection from Japan's indigenous SIGINT and IMINT capability[205] and to Japan's wealth of economic intelligence on the PRC. Japan would benefit from access to Australia's strategic all-source intelligence assessments as well as support from Australia's similarly sized intelligence community, with structural advantages and parliamentary oversight, as Japan looks to improve its own intelligence apparatus.

Key policy recommendations

This report sets out the case for strengthened intelligence cooperation between Japan and Australia and provides a series of recommendations as to how the Japanese and Australian Intelligence Communities should overcome existing obstacles to achieve this, including:

- Establishing a consensus on the benefit of expanded intelligence cooperation and developing a strategy that clearly articulates the logical steps or 'building blocks' to achieve that objective.
- Ensuring a clear understanding of the existential threat presented by the PRC's malign actions to the security and economic prosperity of Japan and Australia across policy agencies and government.
- Earning social licence and political support for the required legislative and structural reforms by encouraging academic and public discourse on the necessity and benefits of expanded intelligence cooperation between Japan and Australia.
- Strengthening bilateral intelligence cooperation as a primary objective by expanding upon existing inter-agency relationships to ensure coordinated efforts across the Indo-Pacific as well as supporting efforts in Japan to improve capability and information security.
- Using specific 'building blocks' to overcome existing barriers and advance bilateral intelligence cooperation, including increasing in-country language training opportunities, implementing shared training and initiating short familiarisation visits of intelligence officers to sister agencies as part of a long-term objective of secondments within respective intelligence communities.
- Developing trilateral intelligence cooperation with the US/Japan/Australia as a secondary objective at both the operational and strategic levels.

Australia's Foreign Minister Penny Wong and Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Richard Marles meet with Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida in Tokyo, December 2022. Source: Getty

Introduction

In an increasingly tense strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific, expanded, directed, and enabled intelligence cooperation between Australia and Japan is crucial to achieving effective collective deterrence. As the United States' primary regional security partners, with increasing bilateral security cooperation based on mutual strategic interests and an alignment of values, improved intelligence cooperation between Japan and Australia would be a logical force multiplier. Such cooperation is inhibited by concerns about information security and disparate capabilities. There is a need for a clearly articulated strategy to demonstrate that improved intelligence sharing and cooperation is achievable and necessary.

This paper sets out how the Japanese and Australian Intelligence Communities can overcome obstacles to strengthen intelligence cooperation at the strategic and operational levels, to develop a shared intelligence picture of the PRC intent and People's Liberation Army (PLA) capability to change the status quo in the Taiwan Strait and East and South China Seas.

Rationale for strengthened bilateral intelligence cooperation

According to Australian Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Richard Marles, "there is no other country in the world today that we have a closer strategic alignment with than with Japan."[206] That alignment is rooted in shared values as liberal, parliamentary democracies that uphold the rule of law and prioritise protecting human rights, as much as it is in shared strategic interests. Both countries share a common understanding of the threat posed by the PRC's revisionist and expansionist behaviour at the regional and global levels, while simultaneously needing to carefully balance engagement with the PRC as the largest trading partner for both countries. Japan and Australia also understand the imperative of ensuring that the United States remains engaged in the region, particularly under the 'America First' agenda of the second Trump presidency.

In that context, greater security cooperation has become an increasingly important element of the bilateral relationship. Yet Japan and Australia's intelligence cooperation is a lagging component of that agenda, particularly when compared with advances in broader defence cooperation.[207] Improved and expanded intelligence collaboration would enhance the two countries' ability to contribute to collective deterrence of conflict in the Indo-Pacific, a concept now firmly at the heart of the bilateral agenda.

Strategic environment – three flashpoints

Japan and Australia face the most complex and challenging strategic environment since the end of the Second World War.[208] A shared vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific is increasingly under threat. The PRC is undertaking the largest military build-up in modern history without strategic reassurance or transparency, while unilaterally attempting to change the status quo, using hybrid warfare and grey-zone activities in the South and East China Seas and in the Taiwan Strait. Taken together, the erosion of regional norms and institutions by these activities presents an existential threat to the security and economic prosperity of both Japan and Australia.

The PRC's malign and coercive behaviour in the South China Sea (SCS) is eroding the sovereignty of Southeast Asian nations and advancing China's territorial ambitions in contravention of the final and legally binding 2016 South China Sea Arbitral Tribunal Award. The increasing use of force in 2024 by Chinese ships against Philippine Coast Guard and Naval assets and personnel is the most prescient example of the increasing risks of escalation. The 17 June 2024 China Coast Guard (CCG) attack on the Philippine resupply mission to the *BRP Sierra Madre*, resulting in injuries to eight Filipino personnel, was the closest incident yet to triggering US commitments under the *1951 Mutual Defense Treaty*.[209] Despite the significant risk of escalation, the PRC has not been deterred from conducting these extremely dangerous tactics.[210]

In the Taiwan Strait, the PLA and CCG rehearsals of a blockade in October (Joint-Sword 2024B), December 2024,[211] and April 2025 (Strait Thunder 2025A)[212] demonstrate Beijing's increasing preparedness to use force to unify Taiwan, in line with President Xi Jinping's stated intent, against the will of the Tai-

wanese people.[213] In the East China Sea, the PRC has continued its unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force and coercion, with increasing intrusions into Japanese territorial waters surrounding the Senkaku Islands.[214] Since President Xi Jinping's instructions to the CCG command office for the East China Sea area in November 2023 to 'constantly strengthen' the PRC's territorial claims, the CCG has achieved a near-daily presence in the vicinity of the Senkaku Islands (353 days in 2024),[215] further escalating the risk of confrontation.[216]

The intelligence challenge

In this challenging environment, deterring a major regional conflict has become a priority objective of the Australia-Japan partnership. The two countries outlined their mutual commitment to deter unilateral changes to the status quo in the Indo-Pacific through the October 2022 Renewed Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation (JDSC). This affirmed the Special Strategic Partnership between Japan and Australia as a key "pillar of a free and open Indo-Pacific" and declared an unwavering commitment to "a rules-based order… where sovereignty and territorial integrity are respected."[217] This mutual commitment to deterrence was reinforced as recently as 5 September 2024 at the Eleventh Australia-Japan 2+2 Foreign and Defence Ministerial Consultations.[218]

Japan, Australia, the United States and other like-minded countries are committing considerable capital to underwrite collective deterrence. Ensuring the effectiveness of these efforts is complicated by resource constraints, reduced strategic warning time, and the difficulty of discerning Chinese intentions. To quote Dr Kevin Rudd, "a central question for our time, if we are to avoid war across the Taiwan Straits, is to understand how Xi Jinping actually interprets the deterrence strategies of the US, Taiwan itself, and US allies and strategic partners."[219] Yet understanding how Xi Jinping interprets deterrence efforts is extremely difficult in an opaque and authoritarian regime, where public statements are carefully scripted and choreographed, and provide limited insight into internal machinations. The inner workings of the Central Military Commission of the PRC are likely the hardest of intelligence targets, as would be understanding the decision-making processes around initiating conflict over Taiwan or in the East and South China Seas.[220]

Collecting against this intelligence requirement and providing, through strategic analysis, the required insights for democratic leaders to make better informed decisions, is a capability not truly achievable by one country alone. Collaborative intelligence collection and analysis provide the best means to understand if the deterrence strategy being collectively enacted is effective, because it combines diverse perspectives, collection capabilities and analytical expertise to create a more nuanced and complete picture of the PRC's intentions and actions. The resultant intelligence product would inform the adaption of Australian and Japanese deterrence capabilities to ensure war is avoided and a free and open Indo-Pacific is upheld.

A brief history of Japan-Australia intelligence cooperation

Australia and Japan have cooperated as intelligence partners since at least the 1970s, ensuring that efforts to build upon existing cooperation have a solid foundation of understanding and engagement.

Australia's foreign intelligence agency, the Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS), established a station in Tokyo in April 1955 with the primary task of producing reporting on China, and a restriction from the (then) Foreign Affairs Department of only producing intelligence on Japan incidentally in the conduct of that primary task.[221] This restriction is notable, given that only a decade had passed since the end of the Pacific War. By the 1970s, exchanges of intelligence between Japan's and Australia's intelligence communities were quietly underway[222] and a formal liaison relationship between ASIS and the (then) Cabinet Research Organisation (now the Cabinet Intelligence Research Office [CIRO] *Naikaku jōhō chōsa-shitsu*) was established in Tokyo in 1976.[223]

Calls to expand the intelligence relationship are not without historical precedent, for Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, later Ambassador to Australia, Shizuo Saito prepared a security report for a Japanese Government inquiry in the late 1980s which foresaw "Australian and Japanese Defence Forces cooperating in exchanges of intelligence."[224] But it wasn't until the 1990s, and in particular the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis, that shared concern over

China's influence and malign actions in the Indo-Pacific led to a tangible increase in intelligence cooperation between Japan and Australia.[225] This included the sharing of strategic assessments between CIRO and the Australian Office of National Intelligence (ONI) from the mid-1990s.[226] The establishment of Japan's Defense Intelligence Headquarters (DIH — *Jōhō honbu*) in 1997, with support and policy advice from Australia, provided a direct counterpart for the (now) Australian Signals Directorate (ASD) and the Defence Intelligence Organisation (DIO), allowing the sharing of bespoke intelligence assessments up to the secret level.[227]

Intelligence sharing appears to have stagnated throughout the early 2000s, largely hampered by concerns about Japan's ability to secure shared intelligence, Japan's anaemic intelligence architecture, and a reluctance for substantive engagement on the part of the Japanese Intelligence Community (JIC).[228] This began to change during Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's first administration with the commitment from the March 2007 Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation to increase the "exchange of strategic assessments and related information" between the defence forces and other security-related agencies of Japan and Australia.[229] Critically, a framework for the protection and sharing of classified information between the two countries was achieved with the entry into force of the Japan-Australia Information Security Agreement (ISA) in March 2013.[230] This was also a Prime Minister Abe legacy with the original commitment for implementation occurring at the second Japan-Australia 2+2 Foreign and Defence Ministerial Consultations in December 2008.[231] These two key achievements speak to the necessity of political commitment to achieve the necessary frameworks and legislative changes for expanded cooperation.

A largely unnoticed but further critical development was the creation of a framework for sharing intelligence trilaterally through the October 2016 signing of a Trilateral Information Sharing Agreement (TISA) by representatives of Japan, Australia, and US Defence Departments in Honolulu.[232] This TISA provides a framework that would allow the creation of a Trilateral Security Dialogue-based intelligence sharing mechanism such as a Japan, Australia, US (JPN/AUS/US) releasable intelligence classification. An opportunity that has likely been hindered by shared US and Australian concerns over Japanese information security.[233]

But it was the Australia-Japan Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation (JDSC) signed in October 2022 that marked a true turning point for strengthened bilateral intelligence cooperation with the first specific references to intelligence. The JDSC set out a commitment over the next ten years to October 2032 to "strengthen exchanges of strategic assessments at all levels, including through annual reciprocal leaders' meetings, foreign and defence ministers' meetings, dialogues between senior officials, and *intelligence cooperation*." It also committed to "reinforcing security and defence cooperation including in *intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance*."[234]

This commitment was further expanded in the joint statement from the eleventh Australia-Japan 2+2 Foreign and Defence Ministerial Consultations held in Queenscliff, Victoria on 5 September 2024. The joint statement noted that Japan and Australia "concurred on further strengthening exchanges of strategic assessments at all levels in line with the 2022 Australia-Japan Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation."[235] The joint statement referred to efforts to "further integrate our systems and strengthen foundations of our Special Strategic Partnership to protect and advance our interests for a period of geostrategic competition, including through… deepening discussions on *classified information sharing* to enhance strategic coordination, interoperability and deterrence, under the Information Security Agreement."[236] This joint statement and the JDSC before it, clearly outline the shared intent of the Japanese and Australian Government's to deepen intelligence cooperation to support deterrence efforts.

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A fireside chat moderated by former US Secretary of State Dr Condoleezza Rice and featuring intelligence chiefs from across the Five Eyes coalition at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, October 2023. Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation

Barriers to advancing bilateral intelligence sharing

Despite this long history of cooperation, there are three key barriers to expanding intelligence sharing between Australia and Japan. These obstacles include the security of shared intelligence given shortcomings in cybersecurity and clearance/vetting systems, language capability to facilitate shared strategic assessments, and the political appetite or capital to achieve the necessary legislative reforms in support of expanded cooperation. These obstacles are surmountable, and indeed, steps have been, and are being taken, to achieve the necessary improvements.

Security of shared intelligence

A primary area of concern is the ability for the JIC to ensure the security of shared intelligence. John Hemmings of CSIS argues there are three standards the JIC would need to achieve to facilitate accession to the Five Eyes community: the establishment of a clearance and vetting system, a classification system, and information sharing standard operating procedures (SOPs).[237] These 'standards' apply equally to the ability for Australia and Japan to increase intelligence cooperation, although Japan has achieved much over the last decade to realise these required standards. Japan introduced clearance and vetting systems in 2013 through the *Act on the Protection of Specially Designated Secrets* (SDS Act), which focused on 'national security' information.[238] Clearance and vetting systems were extended to 'economic security' information in 2024 through the *Act on the Protection and Utilization of Important Economic Security Information* (the CESI Act) classification system.[239] Information sharing SOPs, in as much as they relate to intelligence cooperation between Japan and Australia, were achieved in March 2013 through the implementation of the Information Sharing Agreement[240] and for Trilateral Information Sharing with the United States in October 2016.[241]

Clearance/vetting and classification systems

Prime Minister Abe's government implemented the *Act on the Protection of Specially Designated Secrets* (SDS Act) in 2013, which covered highly sensitive government information, including top secret and secret, and implemented a standardised government security clearance system for the first time. Japan's processes for security of information still require improvement, despite the implementation of the SDS Act, given instances of mishandling of intelligence information continue to occur. Over one hundred instances of mishandling since the implementation of the act were reported by the SDF in December 2024.[242] Poor understanding of the law was also blamed for a sequence of instances of mismanagement of designated security secrets within the Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF), which ultimately led to the resignation of the MSDF Chief of Staff Admiral Ryo Sakai in July 2024.[243] The SDF's self-reporting of these instances through the 2024 Defense of Japan update and the efforts therein to improve information security across the force, including a comprehensive review by the Defense Vice Minister,[244] speak to the procedural and cultural change that is occurring across the Japanese system, which lacked both security clearances and a classification system until the SDS Act. The task is large, such as refitting and refurbishing Combat Information Centres (CIC) on naval vessels to comply with the requirements for handling information consistent with the SDS Act, but according to the 2024 Defense update, progress is being made.

Another encouraging development has been the implementation of the *Act on the Protection and Utilization of Important Economic Security Information* (the CESI Act), which the Diet passed on 10 May 2024. The CESI Act provides for the establishment of a new security clearance system in the economic security sector.[245] The CESI Act is intended to supplement the SDS Act, extending to 'confidential' information, and provides a security clearance pathway for individuals outside government, including in private companies and academia.[246] While political necessity ensured the CESI Act was introduced as a stand-alone act, rather than as an amendment to the SDS Act, given the domestic political controversy around the passing of the SDS Act, credit should be afforded to the Japanese political system for implementing these much-needed legislative reforms.

No intelligence security system is perfect, as Australia and the Five Eyes well know from large-scale, damaging leaks over the years, and Japan is making significant progress toward a more secure clearance/vetting and classification system.

In 2023, Australia centralised security vetting for the most sensitive security clearances, TOP SECRET-Privileged Access (TS-PA), with the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) through a legislative amendment;[247] while other clearances remain with the Australian Government Security Vetting Agency (AGSVA). This change was due to "unprecedented threats from espionage and foreign interference"[248] and reflects the requirement for constant improvement of clearance and vetting systems. ASIO would be well placed to share lessons learned from this process with the National Police Agency (NPA — *Keisatsu-chō*) and the Public Security Intelligence Agency (PSIA — *Kōanchōsachō*), as Japan improves its clearance/vetting and classification systems.

Cybersecurity

Another area viewed as posing a risk in sharing intelligence is Japan's lack of cybersecurity. Japan was criticised as 'lagging behind' other major countries by former US Director of National Intelligence Dennis C. Blair, who presented a report to the Japanese Government in April 2022.[249] This vulnerability was laid bare by a *Washington Post* report in August 2023 that Chinese hackers had accessed sensitive Japanese defence systems.[250] In response, and in line with commitments from the 2022 National Security Strategy, the Japanese Government has recently taken steps to improve cybersecurity with the *Act on Active Cyber Defense* (*Jūyō denshi keisanki ni taisuru fuseina kōi ni yoru higai no bōshi ni kansuru hōritsu-an*) successfully passing Cabinet on 7 February 2025[251] and the Upper House on 16 May 2025.[252]

For the first time, the *Act on Active Cyber Defense* and the supporting adjustments to pre-existing cyber laws allow the authorisation of cyber exploitation as well as allowing for the protection of critical government cyber assets. While NPA will have law enforcement responsibility for responding to attacks, the Japan Self-Defence Forces (JSDF) and more particularly DIH, will have authority to respond to attacks that are seen to target something particularly sensitive or are deemed to be perpetrated by an organisation with the backing of a foreign nation.[253] With

99% of cyber-attacks in 2024 originating overseas, DIH are likely to have primary responsibility for monitoring and implementing 'active measures' to mitigate cyber threats, which will include identifying and neutralising the source of cyberattacks.[254] DIH will also be strengthened with a broad increase of personnel for both cyber and other roles, growing from around 2,500 in 2025 to a target of 4,000 over five years under funding committed from fiscal year 2026.[255] The creation of a Ministry of Defence (MOD) Centre for Excellence for Cyber Security will seek to mitigate training shortfalls across the sector and define a pathway to meet these planned staffing numbers. The National Centre for Incident Readiness and Strategy for Cybersecurity (NISC) (*Naikaku saibāsekyuritisentā*) will gain a new vice minister-level head as the cybersecurity commissioner within the national security secretariat and hold responsibility for engaging with industry.

Full implementation of the law will take a further two years through to 2027, but is an encouraging advancement in Japan's cybersecurity, and ensures that expanded cooperation with Australia, the United States, and other like-minded partners will be possible. Australia and Japan are already working together to address cybersecurity with a commitment from the eleventh Australia-Japan 2+2 in September 2024 to "deepening dialogue between our foreign ministries' chief information officers to build resilience in government systems to cyber challenges and manage supply chain and vendor risks."[256] With DIH moving to an ASD-like 'Active Cyber Defence' role, and NISC fulfilling an ASD Australian Cyber Security Centre-like industry engagement role, there is significant opportunity for cooperation as Japan develops this new Active Cyber Defence function. Indeed, Australia has its own experience, which led to the implementation of the *Cyber Security Act* in 2024; knowledge which would be valuable to the JIC at this juncture.

Language capability

Language ability is a further significant barrier which must be overcome for the Japanese and Australian Intelligence Communities to truly work collaboratively on developing a shared intelligence picture of the threat in the Indo-Pacific. There is a collective requirement to develop the capability to understand intelligence assessments and product in both countries' primary language. However, in Australia, there are less than 12,000 people studying Japanese at a university level[257] and "too few of the nation's intelligence officers possess adequate foreign language skills."[258] As of 2024, Japan ranks 93rd for English proficiency amongst 116 non-primary English-speaking countries,[259] a steep decline from 53rd in 2019, and significantly lower than other North Asian and Southeast Asian countries. Less than 30% of the population speak any English, and only 8% have university-level proficiency which would be required for intelligence cooperation.[260] While intelligence exchange between Japan and Australia is largely conducted in English, many Japanese intelligence officials lack the fluency required to achieve a detailed understanding of the subject matter being discussed, while the Australian Intelligence Community's (AIC) lack of Japanese skills would severely hamper primary source as well as strategic collaboration. The intelligence communities in both countries need to develop the language capability required to support expanded intelligence cooperation.

Language ability is a further significant barrier which must be overcome for the Japanese and Australian Intelligence Communities to truly work collaboratively on developing a shared intelligence picture of the threat in the Indo-Pacific.

To overcome this obstacle, the Japanese and Australian Intelligence Communities should invest in in-country language training opportunities, securing return of investment by posting officers to respective countries for longer periods of time, or repeated postings. Encouragingly, MOFA has, for the first time in decades, reimplemented its English language training program in Australia, where posted officers can study Australian English and develop the cultural and shared experience necessary to further the relationship.[261] The implementation of shared training opportunities would also support the development of language skills and a cohort of officers with shared experience and knowledge. For example, ONI's recently created National Intelligence Academy in Australia could begin offering courses to Japanese intelligence counterparts to share learning and experiences. While more sensitive and perhaps difficult to achieve, secondments of intelligence officers to work in sister agencies from both countries would be a significant step to building trust, with short familiarisation visits presenting a possible initial pathway. The secondment of a PSIA officer to the United States Studies Centre, the University of Sydney, and an NPA officer to the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) are both positive developments which should be reciprocated. An expanded program of secondments into government, given the resultant dividend this could achieve for improved cooperation, could form a future objective.

Political appetite/capital

A final barrier to expanding intelligence cooperation between Japan and Australia is a lack of political appetite and capital to advance the necessary reforms, despite the bilateral consensus on necessity. Japan's Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) poor results in the October 2024 lower house elections have left Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru leading a fragile coalition minority government, which has encountered opposition in passing defence spending proposals and 2025 budget bills, and necessitated a largely domestic political focus.[262] While Australia re-elected the Albanese Labor Government with a significantly increased majority at the polls on 3 May 2025[263] Australian politicians on both sides of the spectrum have been criticised by some prominent journalists and academics, for ignoring the significant geopolitical shifts and complete revision of the post-Second World War order currently occurring.[264]

Advocacy and engagement with political decision makers by intelligence communities in both countries must be carefully targeted to ensure reforms are prioritised and executed in a timely fashion. Similarly, it is crucial to establish social licence with the Australian and Japanese publics through academic and public discourse on the necessity of expanded intelligence cooperation so that public support exists for the necessary legislative and structural reforms. Former Japanese Ambassador to Australia Yamagami Shingo stated that "intelligence ties between Australia and Japan constitute the most important pillar of bilateral cooperation,"[265] yet there is limited academic or public written work examining intelligence cooperation between Japan and Australia. This is likely because in Australia, of the ten tenured professor positions focused on Japan across the University sector, all retain a cultural rather than geostrategic focus, while in Japan, academic research on intelligence is not recognised as a priority research area. To establish social licence for the legislative and structural changes required to achieve expanded and strengthened intelligence cooperation between our two democratic countries, discourse must be encouraged and consensus built.

Benefits and opportunities from bilateral intelligence cooperation

For Australia

Australia would stand to gain from expanded bilateral intelligence cooperation with Japan. As highlighted by Ambassador Yamagami, Japan has a lot to offer as "Japan has been standing on the frontline of strategic challenges facing this region over a number of centuries. By comparing notes between us, I think we can mutually benefit."[266] Indeed, with elements of shared culture, literature, academic and person-to-person interactions with China over the last two centuries, Japan and the JIC have a grasp of the PRC and Chinese mentality that would be valuable to the AIC and the broader Australian Government.

More specifically, Australian decision-makers could significantly benefit from access to the collection from Japan's indigenous SIGINT and IMINT capability through their own bespoke satellite network.[267] DIH operate the majority of Japan's SIGINT capabili-

ty, with the largest staff (currently 2,500) and budget (¥67.2 billion) of the major institutions of the Japanese Intelligence Community;[268] while the Cabinet Satellite Intelligence Centre (CSICE) (*Naikaku eisei jōhō senta*) operates Japan's IMINT capability.[269] Japan's commitment to nearly double its indigenous military satellite network from five to nine satellites by fiscal year 2029 ensures that the value of this capability, particularly its ability to detect missile launches, will only increase.[270]

Similarly, Japan has access to a wealth of economic intelligence on the PRC through the approximately 31,000 Japanese businesses operating in China[271] that maintain engagement with the Japanese Government through MOFA and the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI — *Keizai-sangyō-shō*). Indeed, METI has significant experience in engaging with China to maximise economic opportunity and minimise risks to sovereignty such as through economic coercion. The PRC has increasingly shown a willingness to use economic coercion to influence geopolitical outcomes in the Indo-Pacific, and there is much Australia can learn from Japan on minimising and diversifying the risk of economic engagement with China, particularly given that both Australia and Japan must contend with China being their largest trading partner.

Collectively

Japan and Australia hold a shared view of the value of a free and open Indo-Pacific, where all states abide by international law, and where sovereignty and territorial integrity are respected.[272] In Australia, this is a bipartisan commitment, even if the rhetoric or approach differs, and in Japan the understanding of the threat is clear, given geographic proximity and a long history of contact with China. The Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States, released by the Biden administration in February 2022, also commits to advancing a free and open Indo-Pacific,[273] but it is increasingly unclear how committed a second Trump administration is to alliance partnerships, international law, and deterring conflict in the Indo-Pacific.[274] There is significant value for Australia and Japan in collective advocacy on Indo-Pacific issues to the US Government and working together to continue to tie the United States to the region, while simultaneously deepening bilateral cooperation to prepare for a world in which the US presence is diminished.[275]

For Japan

There are two key benefits for Japan in expanded intelligence cooperation with Australia. The first is access to Australia's strategic all-source intelligence assessments where the shared focus with Japan on the PRC's malign actions in the Indo-Pacific,[276] supported by the robust and highly capable architecture and collection capabilities of the AIC, ensure that these assessments would increase the value and veracity of the intelligence product available to Japanese decision-makers. Some in the Japanese system may ask whether the information shared by Australia would be detailed enough or of benefit, compared to intelligence already shared by the US Intelligence Community (US IC). The answer to this question should be apparent in Australia's retention of a capable and Indo-Pacific-focused *sovereign* intelligence community, where collection and assessments are likely different.

The second key benefit is support from a similarly sized intelligence community in a fellow parliamentary democracy with structural advantages and parliamentary oversight, as Japan looks to improve its own intelligence apparatus. There are three key structural barriers to improving sovereign intelligence collection and analysis capability within the Japanese Intelligence Community. The absence of a true-all source analytical capability, the lack of a foreign human intelligence collection agency, and a lack of independent and parliamentary oversight to ensure that intelligence agencies have social licence. Australia is well-placed to provide advice and a model as Japan seeks to overcome each of these barriers and modernise its intelligence community into an apparatus that can truly provide an all-source intelligence product to support government decision-makers.

All-source analytical capability

The JIC lacks a true all-source analytical capability. While CIRO is mandated to "provide insightful intelligence to the Cabinet to support its decision making,"[277] the reality is that it lacks the personnel, the language and analytical capability, and the requisite source intelligence to conduct true all-source analysis.[278] Australia has a long history of all-source intelligence assessment, which would be valuable experience to share with Japan, from the establishment of the Joint Intelligence Bureau in 1947 and subsequent reforms to the Joint Intelligence

Organisation in 1969 and the Defence Intelligence Organisation in 1989.[279] Australia also established the Office of National Assessment in 1977, which was renamed the Office of National Intelligence in 2018, with an expanded remit to lead the National Intelligence Community (NIC). The reform of ONI to create an agency to "provide the Prime Minister and other members of the National Security Committee of Cabinet intelligence-based advice, analysis and assessments"[280] demonstrates a possible pathway for Japan to achieve a comprehensive strategic all-source agency through an expansion of CIRO's capability and capacity.

Foreign human intelligence collection agency

Japan also suffers from a "lack of a specialized foreign intelligence agency with a clandestine HUMINT capability."[281] Japan is unique in this regard as "a national intelligence agency that is tasked with collecting HUMINT abroad, overtly or covertly, is an important component of many countries' foreign and security policy apparatus."[282] While Japan may wish to look to the US Central Intelligence Agency or the UK's MI6 as suitable foreign intelligence models it may wish to emulate within its own system, the reality is that in size, remit and focus, ASIS provides a much more relevant model for Japan.[283] ASIS also has the experience and capability to support Japan in developing an effective foreign intelligence agency. In March 2015 *The Australian* newspaper reported that ASIS had been delivering training in Australia to the JIC since 2008 "in the tradecraft of espionage"[284] in support of efforts "to establish a foreign intelligence unit" and a "human intelligence collection capability."[285] The Japanese Government's decision to secure this training support from ASIS is an indicator of the strength of the bilateral relationship,[286] but also the trust developed through the five decades of liaison relationship and intelligence cooperation. If the Japanese Government chooses to develop a specialised foreign intelligence and HUMINT capability, there will be significant legislative requirements, which the AIC, and ASIS specifically, are well placed to provide advice on, given the similarity of our parliamentary democracies.

The Australian Signals Directorate cyber and foreign intelligence facility in Canberra, March 2022.
Source: Australian Department of Defence

A view of the National Diet building in Tokyo, Japan. Source: Tsuyoshi Kozu/Unsplash

Independent and parliamentary oversight

A final key structural inhibitor to Japan's sovereign intelligence collection capability, where Japan could benefit significantly from expanded cooperation with Australia, is in the development of parliamentary and/or independent oversight. Of all the G7 countries and Australia, Japan is the only country without an exclusively dedicated parliamentary or administrative democratic oversight body, responsible for the intelligence community.[287] Oversight mechanisms are critical to not only ensure legal and proper compliance of an intelligence community, but through the existence of that oversight, to provide social licence for the functions and actions of the intelligence community. This is particularly relevant in Japan where perhaps the largest barrier to the achievement of the necessary structural improvements to the JIC is political concerns over a lack of public support. There was some expectation within the JIC that such a mechanism would be created with the establishment of the Board of Oversight and Review of Specially Designated Secrets (*Shūgiin jōhō kanshi shinsa-kai*) under the SDS Act in 2014. However, that House of Representatives committee's primary function is to oversee the implementation of the Specially Designated Secret (SDS) Act, and it "does not have a mandate for comprehensive IC oversight."[288]

Australia has parliamentary oversight through the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security (PJCIS) which reviews the administration and expenditure of Australian intelligence agencies and ensures the necessity, proportionality and effectiveness of national security legislation.[289] Australia also has independent oversight through the Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security (IGIS). IGIS retains statutory powers akin to those of a standing royal commission and provides independent assurance that the activities of intelligence agencies are legal, proper, comply with ministerial directions, and respect human rights.[290] The PJCIS, IGIS, and the NIC could support Japan to identify the legislative changes necessary to reinforce the function and role of existing mechanisms to provide better democratic oversight and secure public support for the necessary reforms.

CASE STUDY

The Japan-United States (and Australia) bilateral information analysis cell

In September 2024, the eleventh 2+2 joint statement committed, under the title 'Trilateral Defence Cooperation with the United States', to "expand trilateral intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance cooperation in the Indo-Pacific and welcomed Australian personnel's participation in the Japan-United States Bilateral Information Analysis Cell (BIAC)"[291] in Japanese referred to as the *Nichibei kyōdō jōhō bunseki soshiki*. The BIAC provides an excellent case study of what measures are being implemented to increase operational intelligence cooperation and thereby deter conflict, while demonstrating the opportunities that exist to expand this cooperation.

The BIAC is located at the Yokota Air Base in Tokyo and was officially opened on 29 November 2022. It was announced as the first real-time information-sharing capability between the JSDF and US Forces which analyses information gathered by Japan-US Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) assets.[292] This includes the eight MQ-9 Reaper UAVs redeployed south to Kadena Air Base (Okinawa) from October 2023 which are focused on monitoring the PRC's actions in the East China Sea, particularly PRC Government vessels intruding into the waters around the Senkaku Islands and the broader Nansei island chain.[293] The mission of the BIAC is to "jointly analyse information collected by US-Japan intelligence gathering assets and share it with Japanese, US, and Australian forces."[294]

While the September 2024 Australia-Japan 2+2 "welcomed Australian personnel's participation"[295] in the BIAC for the first time, the Japanese MOD has identified that this participation is limited to only two Australian personnel (subject to operational requirements) and does not extend to the allocation of Australian assets.[296] The addition of Australian personnel to the BIAC is a commendable initiative in providing an initial testbed for trilateral *operational* military intelligence cooperation, particularly as it relates to the monitoring of CCG and PLA Navy assets in the East China Sea. Building a combined intelligence picture of PRC activity, rather than conducting overlapping disparate efforts, particularly where it is in support of joint operational activity, is valuable and important.

In line with the commitment from the September 2024 Australia-Japan 2+2 to "expand trilateral ISR cooperation in the Indo-Pacific"[297] the remit of the BIAC should be expanded beyond the initial primary focus on "naval vessels and vessels in" the East China Sea and "the waters surrounding Japan"[298] to include the Taiwan Strait and the SCS. This could include an expanded responsibility for monitoring the movement of PLA Navy, CCG, and People's Armed Forced Maritime Militia surface and sub-surface vessels in the broader Indo-Pacific with additional assets, such as USAF and RAAF P-8A Poseidon and JASDF P-1 overflights, ground-based radar, satellite imagery, sound surveillance systems (SOSUS) and sightings from naval vessels. Australia should commit additional personnel and assets to support the BIAC to ensure the establishment of a true trilateral operational military intelligence capability perhaps relabelled as the Trilateral Information Analysis Cell (TIAC).

The addition of Australian personnel to the BIAC is a commendable initiative in providing an initial testbed for trilateral operational military intelligence cooperation, particularly as it relates to the monitoring of CCG and PLA Navy assets in the East China Sea.

Expanding the role and support for the BIAC would have both a deterrent effect and a current operational benefit, providing an excellent case study of what could be possible more broadly with expanded cooperation. Specifically, the BIAC could provide ISR support for Maritime Cooperative Activities (MCA) such as the MCA completed by Japan, Australia, the Philippines, and the United States in the Philippines Exclusive Economic Zone on 5 February 2025.[299] This multilateral MCA was directly supported by a RAAF P-8 Poseidon and was likely within range of the MQ-9 Reapers allocated to the BIAC flying from Okinawa (1,300 kms) with extended-range fuelling capability (2,600 kms).[300] It is conceivable the BIAC could in future, support this and other MCAs by monitoring movements of PLA Navy and CCG vessels in response, providing a real-time operational intelligence collection and analysis capability for deployed forces. This could assist in tracking PLA assets and mitigate risks around incidents such as that on 11 February 2025 where a PLA jet fired flares thirty metres in front of a RAAF P-8 Poseidon over the SCS, in a repeat of previous unsafe PLA manoeuvres.[301]

The BIAC is a noteworthy operational-level trilateral intelligence capability, but it should not be considered as the sole panacea. A further possible pathway to expanding trilateral operational military intelligence cooperation between Japan and Australia is presented with the establishment on 25 March 2025 of the JSDF Joint Operations Command (JJOC).[302] Given that JJOC was, in part, modelled on the ADF's Headquarters Joint Operations Command (HQJOC) and with the deployment of the first JSDF liaison officer to HQJOC in November 2024,[303] consideration could also be given to reciprocal deployments of an intelligence officer into the respective JOC Joint Intelligence (J2) cells. Given the critical role that intelligence will play in supporting the development of operational plans by JJOC, an experienced intelligence officer from HQJOC would be a considerable asset, while such a reciprocal deployment would also improve the interface of the BIAC into both JJOC and HQJOC.

The role of the United States in advancing Japan-Australia intelligence cooperation

The example of the BIAC demonstrates that in addressing a strategy for expanding bilateral intelligence cooperation between Japan and Australia, the role of the United States cannot be ignored. In sheer size, the US IC dwarfs the comparably sized ICs of Australia and Japan. Australia's NIC had an aggregated annual budget of AU$2 billion (US$1.25 billion) and 7,000 staff in 2017.[304] Japan's Intelligence Community was estimated in 2021 to have an annual aggregate budget of US$1.4 billion and a total staff of 4,600 (although this number does not include National Police Agency personnel with an intelligence remit and military personnel with an intelligence function outside of Defense Intelligence Headquarters).[305] The appropriated US intelligence annual budget, a combination of the National Intelligence Program (NIP) and the Military Intelligence Program (MIP), in 2024 was US$106.3 billion[306] and staffing estimates for the NIP alone exceed 110,000.

As the pre-eminent global military power and the primary alliance partner for both Japan and Australia, the United States has an outsized role in deterring conflict in the Indo-Pacific. However, as middle-power countries in the region, Japan and Australia have a critical role in determining the future of the region; not least in ensuring that the United States remains engaged and committed. Japanese scholar Eiichi Katahara views Australia and Japan as two key 'maritime spokes' that will "buttress the United States alliance system otherwise increasingly pressed by rapid and comprehensive power shifts in Asia."[307]

It is also worth noting that while the US IC is significantly better funded and staffed than both the Japanese and Australian intelligence communities, the US IC has a worldwide remit and responsibility, spreading its staffing and resourcing globally. Conversely, the Japanese and Australian intelligence communities have a very clear Indo-Pacific remit and focus. However, given this funding and staffing disparity, Japan and Australia's national government priorities and the strategies of each intelligence community can be lost or supplanted in

engaging with the behemoth of the United States intelligence community. Therefore, based on Japan and Australia's strategic alignment, maximising bilateral intelligence cooperation offers an opportunity for 'banding' as intelligence communities to advocate collectively and on each other's behalf with the US IC. This expanded bilateral cooperation would also assist in insulating the Japanese and Australian intelligence communities from some of the risks of the second Trump presidency.[308]

Japan and Australia should therefore work towards advancing bilateral intelligence cooperation, and working within existing trilateral mechanisms where possible, while advocating and supporting each other within the US system to maximise the cooperative intelligence outcomes that can be achieved within the region. This would be consistent with the messaging from the eleventh Australia-Japan 2+2 Foreign and Defence Ministerial Consultations where, according to Defence Minister Marles, speaking broadly on defence cooperation, the four attending ministers "looked at opportunities where both of us have bilateral engagements with the United States and sought to seek opportunities where we can trilateralise them, where we can involve each other in those activities."[309]

Japan's Defence Minister Minoru Kihara and Minister of Foreign Affairs Yoko Kamikawa with Australia's Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Richard Marles and Foreign Minister Penny Wong at the 11th Australia-Japan 2+2 Foreign and Defence Ministerial Consultation in Queenscliff, Victoria, September 2024. Source: Getty

Policy recommendations

Increasing strategic tensions in the Indo-Pacific mean that expanded, directed and enabled intelligence cooperation between Australia and Japan should be an urgent priority, consistent with the sentiment reflected in the 2022 JDSC.[310] To overcome existing barriers and to achieve these objectives, a strategy of 'building blocks' should be employed, where briefed and compartmentalised areas and opportunities can be developed quickly into a fully-fledged cooperative intelligence relationship. Some suggested policy options to achieve this are as follows:

1. Articulate a strategy and build consensus:
    a. The AIC needs to develop a strategy designed to achieve a consensus on the pathway for expanded intelligence cooperation with the JIC. Academic writing on the JIC focuses on barriers and shortcomings, often not acknowledging the significant progress the JIC has made. The PRC threat is such that risk must be engaged with to ensure expanded cooperation is realised to deter and prepare for conflict. Establishing a consensus across the AIC on the pathway to expanded cooperation, and the logical steps or 'building blocks' to achieve the goals set out in the JDSC, will ensure alignment of purpose and unity of effort.
    b. Similarly, the JIC needs to establish a consensus on the benefit of engagement with the AIC. There appears to be a minority view within the JIC that Australia's geographic distance ensures that Australia would have little intelligence of value on the PRC or that existing cooperation with the US IC supplants any requirement for expanded cooperation with the AIC. With the AICs excellent intelligence architecture and focus on the PRC's actions across the Indo-Pacific,[311] the benefits for Japan from expanded intelligence cooperation with Australia should be clear. Senior articulation of this intent within the JIC, in alignment with the intent of both governments, would similarly ensure alignment of purpose and remove any latent obstacles or reticence.
2. Articulate a clear intelligence requirement in both countries by establishing 'policy pull' based on the PRC threat. Honest and proactive dialogue with government and policy agencies is necessary to establish a clear understanding of the strategic environment and the existential threat to the security and economic prosperity of our two nations. A clear understanding of the threat will ensure that government and policy agencies seek greater intelligence fidelity in developing policy, ensuring support for expanded cooperative arrangements.
3. Earn social licence and political support for the legislative and structural reforms by encouraging academic and public discourse on the necessity and benefits of expanded intelligence cooperation between Japan and Australia. Achieving this social licence will assist in removing barriers to the necessary legislative reforms and increase political will to make those reforms.
4. Advance bilateral intelligence cooperation between Australia and Japan as the primary objective using inter-agency relationships to achieve:
    a. Expanded cooperation with ASIS as the NIC lead in Japan and as an advocate for the JIC within the NIC. Opportunities exist as Japan seeks to build a foreign human intelligence collection capability (based on historic ASIS training support), but also in coordinating intelligence diplomacy and operationalising maritime domain awareness efforts across the Indo-Pacific.
    b. Expanded cooperation between JSDF/DIH and NISC with ASD as Japan builds its Active Cyber Defence capability over the next two years.
    c. Expanded cooperation between CIRO and ONI as Japan seeks to enhance its all-source intelligence analysis capability.
    d. Support from PJCIS and IGIS as Japan seeks to develop parliamentary and/or independent oversight.
    e. ASIO sharing lessons learned from the TS-PA process with NPA and PSIA in addition to existing domestic security cooperation.

5. Advance bilateral intelligence cooperation between Australia and Japan as the primary objective, using building blocks such as:
    a. Increase in-country language training opportunities, securing return on investment by posting officers to respective countries for longer periods of time or repeated postings.
    b. Implement shared training opportunities to build a cohort of officers with shared experience and knowledge. For example, ONI's recently created National Intelligence Academy in Australia should begin offering course attendance to Japanese intelligence counterparts.
    c. Implement short familiarisation visits of intelligence officers to sister agencies from both countries to build trust and capability as an immediate objective and a long-term pathway to secondments to sister agencies within respective Governments.
6. Develop trilateral intelligence cooperation with the US/Japan/Australia as the secondary objective at both the operational and strategic levels:
    a. Operational level: At the operational level, the BIAC provides an excellent 'building block'. The remit of the BIAC should be expanded to include the broader Indo-Pacific, in line with the commitment from the eleventh Australia-Japan 2+2. This would allow coordinated monitoring of PLA Navy, CCG, and People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia surface and sub-surface vessels and real-time updates to deployed forces, including on multilateral Maritime Cooperation Activities. Provision of feeds from additional assets should be considered, such as USAF and RAAF P-8A Poseidon and JASDF P-1 overflights, ground-based radar, satellite imagery, SOSUS and sightings from naval vessels. Australia should commit additional personnel and assets to support the BIAC, ensuring the establishment of a true trilateral operational military intelligence capability or TIAC.
    b. With the establishment on 25 March 2025 of the JSDF Joint Operations Command (JJOC),[312] consideration should be given to reciprocal deployments of an intelligence officer into the respective JOC J2 cells, in addition to the existing liaison officers.
    c. Strategic level: Establish a trilateral security dialogue-based intelligence sharing mechanism such as a Japan, Australia, US (JPN/AUS/US) releasable intelligence classification with the supporting infrastructure to facilitate sharing of strategic intelligence assessments.

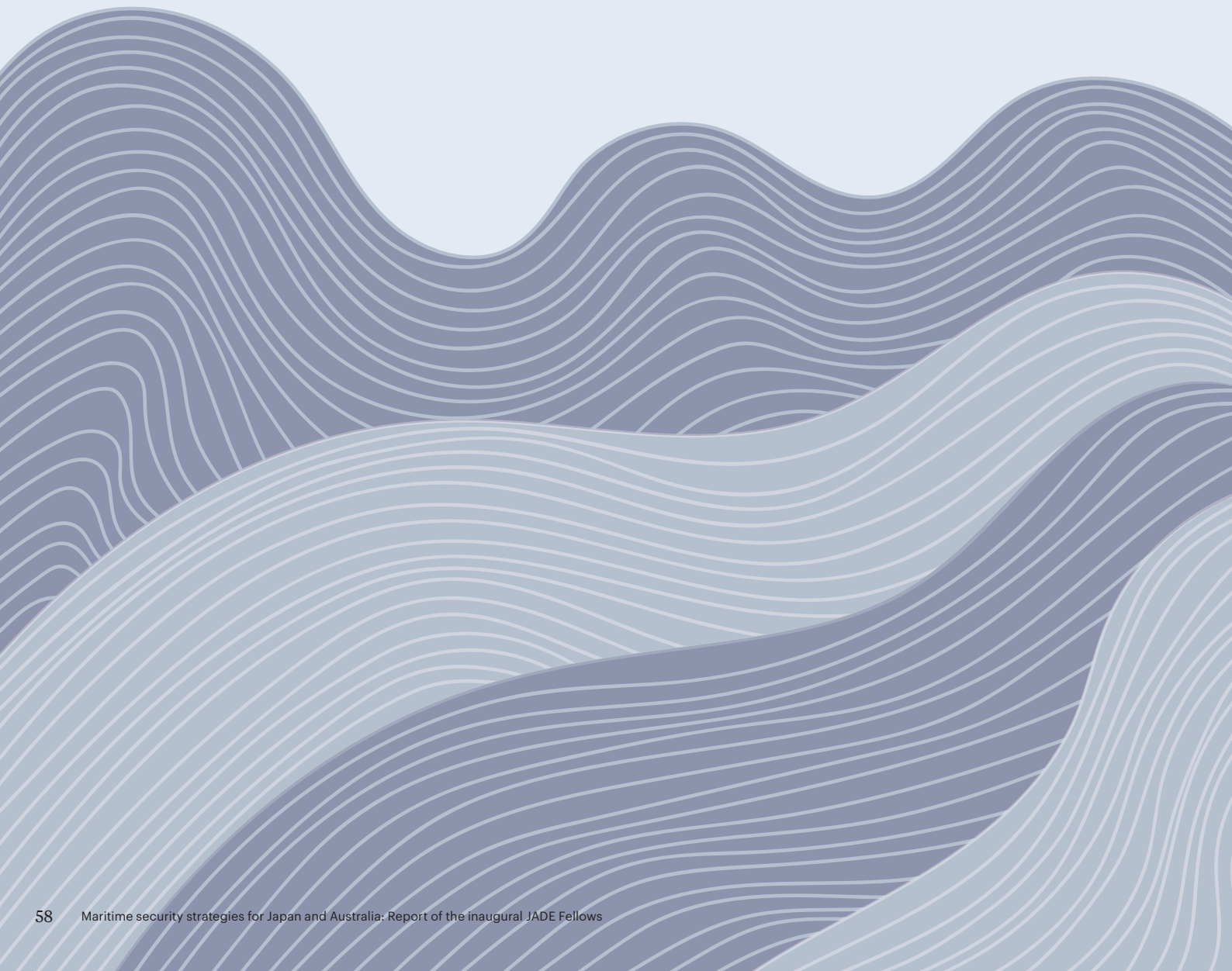
Conclusion: The case for enhanced Japan-Australia intelligence cooperation

The imperative for expanded intelligence cooperation between Japan and Australia is clear. The PRC's malign actions and stated intent, coupled with the largest military build-up in modern history without strategic reassurance or transparency, ensure that deterrence of conflict is the most pressing and prescient challenge for our two nations. Japan and Australia are aligned in our perception of that threat, and in our values as liberal, parliamentary democracies that uphold the rule of law and prioritise the protection of human rights.

While our defence and security relationships have expanded significantly, the intelligence relationship remains underdeveloped because of existing barriers. Much has been done to overcome these obstacles but more remains to be achieved. Australia is well-positioned to work with Japan as these improvements are made. The benefits for both our nations are clear. The objective must be expanding intelligence cooperation to achieve a shared intelligence picture of the PRC intent and PLA capability to change the status quo in the Taiwan Strait and East and South China Seas, in as timely a fashion as possible given the looming nature of the threat.

SECTION THREE

Strategic frameworks



Evolving strategies in Australia's China policy: A comparative analysis of Liberal-National Coalition leadership from Abbott to Morrison

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Executive summary

- Since the early 2010s, Australia's China policy has evolved and changed in response to China's expanding influence and assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region.[313] This paper explores the evolution of Australia's China policies during the Liberal-National coalition governments between 2013 and 2022. It highlights the need for adaptive policy frameworks in response to China's shifting role in the Indo-Pacific region.
- In Tony Abbott's government (2013-2015), Australia balanced economic and security interests. Under Malcolm Turnbull (2015-2018), Australia enacted protective measures against Chinese influence and interference. The Scott Morrison government (2018-2022) marked a shift forward to prioritising national security and alliances over economic considerations as evidenced in bolstered security partnerships such as the Quad and AUKUS. The Morrison government also introduced firm measures, notably banning Huawei and ZTE from the 5G network and firmly opposing China's territorial claims in the South China Sea.
- After Australia-China relations deteriorated to unprecedented levels during the Morrison government — most visibly resulting in significant diplomatic and economic tensions — Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's government (2022-) has sought to restore economic ties with China without compromising on Australian national security interests through careful engagement.
- In the wake of a re-elected Albanese government benefiting from a notable majority in parliament and the opportunity to outline its foreign policy priorities for the next three years, Japan should proactively engage with Australia to strengthen bilateral security and economic cooperation to jointly shape the Indo-Pacific.
- In order to position Japan effectively in the evolving geopolitical landscape and strengthen its response to the challenges posed by China's growing influence, Japan should adopt adaptive security measures that incorporate robust legislative and institutional frameworks, deepen security cooperation with key allies such as Australia and enhance regional engagement across the Indo-Pacific.

Introduction

This paper explores the evolution of Australia's China policies under successive Liberal-National coalition governments by tracing developments between the early 2010s and early 2020s.[314] Over that period, Australia's China policy evolved from Tony Abbott's balance of economic and security interests to Malcolm Turnbull's protective measures against Chinese influence and interference, and finally to Morrison's prioritisation of security and alliances such as Quad and AUKUS. Consequently, Australia-China relations deteriorated to unprecedented levels, resulting in significant diplomatic and economic tensions. Under Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's leadership, the Labor government has restored economic ties with China without compromising on Australian national security interests through careful engagement. Nevertheless, the foundational security architecture aimed at countering China's growing influence and new-found assertiveness was established by successive Liberal-National governments under Abbott, Turnbull and Morrison.

Under Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's leadership, the Labor government has restored economic ties with China without compromising on Australian national security interests through careful engagement.

Abbott's China policy (2013-2015)

Tony Abbott, Australia's prime minister from 2013 to 2015, managed Australia-China relations by balancing security concerns with economic engagement, employing a realist approach.[315] He utilised a dual strategy: addressing China on security issues while reinforcing strategic alliances and engaging economically to preserve trade benefits. According to John Garnaut, the former senior adviser to then-Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, Tony Abbott acknowledged that his policy toward China was based on two emotions: fear and greed.[316] There was a fear that China's military expansion and assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region would heighten its security threat and destabilise the current international order. Simultaneously, there was a sense of greed that the Australian economy would benefit from a fast-growing Chinese economy, which would lead the world economy.

Abbott viewed China's military activities, including territorial disputes in the East China Sea with Japan, as a threat to regional stability. In response, his government reinforced security ties with allies like the United States and Japan to balance China's influence.[317] In his book *Battlelines*, published in 2009, Abbott's foreign policy perspective is not discussed in depth, but he described the importance of effectively hedging against China's rise in the Indo-Pacific region by strengthening traditional relations with the United States and the United Kingdom and relations with Japan, which shares the same values of liberal democracy and market economy.[318] He also took specific actions to safeguard national security, such as banning Huawei from participating in Australia's National Broadband Network in 2013 due to concerns over cybersecurity risks and possible espionage.[319] Additionally, Abbott chose not to join China's Belt and Road Initiative, expressing concerns that it could lead to debt dependency.[320]

Abbott, however, took a vague stance on the territorial disputes in the South China Sea. He limited his remarks by saying that while there were issues in the region, Australia took no sides in the territorial dispute and it should be resolved peacefully. He was even optimistic about the issue, saying, "We can focus on the South China Sea if we wish and think of the problems, but frankly, I'd rather look at the habits of co-operation which are developing in our region".[321]

Additionally, in 2013, when Japan-China relations deteriorated following Japan's nationalisation of the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, Abbott did not want to unduly upset China, even though Japan was considered Australia's closest friend in Asia.[322]

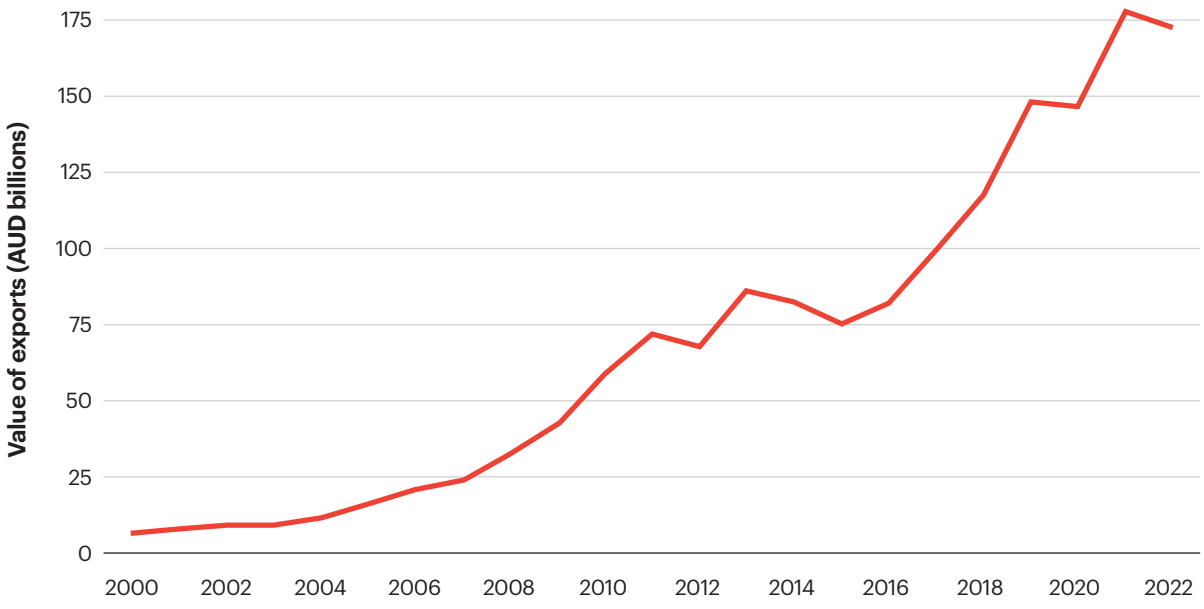
Abbott pursued economic cooperation to leverage trade opportunities, particularly through the China-Australia Free Trade Agreement (ChAFTA) signed in 2015, aimed at enhancing Australia's competitiveness in the Chinese market, boosting economic growth, and creating jobs.[323] In a speech to the Australian Parliament in November 2014, Xi Jinping emphasised that the conclusion of FTA negotiations would provide a better institutional framework for economic cooperation between the two countries.[324] This agreement illustrated his pragmatic approach to fostering economic growth while managing security tensions. Furthermore, Abbott's decision to join the Chinese-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) reflected a willingness to engage in economic initiatives that could benefit Australia, despite concerns regarding China's influence in the Indo-Pacific region. The Chinese Ministry of Finance welcomed Australia's decision to become one of the founding members of the AIIB.[325]

The reason Abbott showed these considerations for China was because he recognised China's significance to Australia's economy as its largest trading partner. As Figure 2 shows, the value of Australian goods exports to China has been increasing steadily since the beginning of the 2000s. In 2000, Australia's exports to China stood at $6.0 billion. Over the next 15 years, this figure increased more than twelvefold, reaching $75.2 billion in 2015.

In 2000, China represented approximately 5% of Australia's total exports, while Japan maintained a dominant position at around 19% (see Figure 3). However, China's share of total exports grew rapidly, overtaking Japan to become Australia's top export partner in 2009, when its share reached approximately 22% compared to Japan's 18%. This upward trend accelerated after the ChAFTA was implemented in 2015, enabling greater market access and reducing trade barriers. By 2015, China's share had surged to 30%, and by 2020, it had climbed to nearly 40%, while Japan's proportion fell to around 10%. This shift underscores Australia's increasing economic reliance on China, solidifying China's role as Australia's primary export destination.

Figure 2.

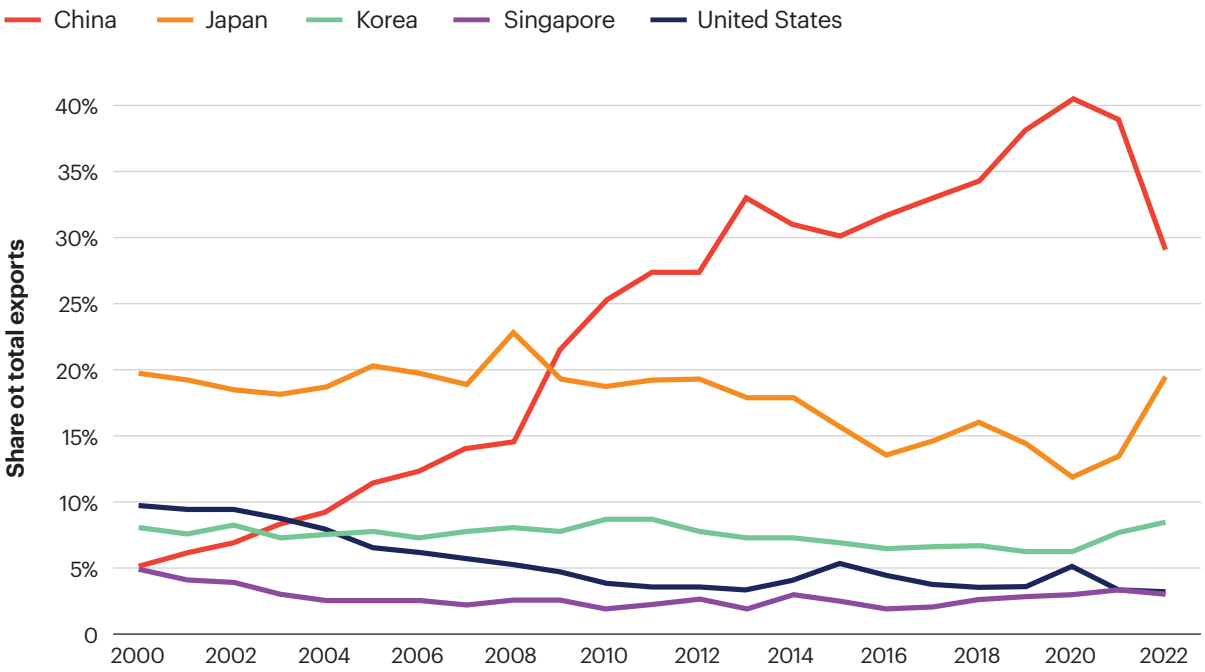
Australia's goods exports to China (2000-2020)



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Figure 3.

Share in total exports (2000-2020)



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics.

The United States viewed the AIIB as a way for China to increase its regional influence. Japan expressed concerns about its coexistence with existing frameworks such as the Asia Development Bank.[326] Despite the concerns of these allies, Abbott joined the AIIB, emphasising that it would play an important role in promoting Australia's infrastructure over the next few years and decades.[327] These agreements demonstrated his pragmatic approach to ensuring economic growth while navigating security tensions.

Turnbull's China policy (2015-2018)

During the time of Prime Minister Turnbull from 2015 to 2018, Australia-China relations reached a turning point. Turnbull initially took over Abbott's balanced economic and security approach to managing Australia-China relations but increasingly "stood up" to China's real challenge, adopting a harder-edged realist policy.[328] Turnbull realised that China's policy decisions were causing friction in the bilateral relationship between China and Australia. Rather than a fundamental change in Australia's China policy coming out of Canberra, it was Australia's response to policy changes coming out of Beijing.[329]

Turnbull understood China's significance as a major trading partner and actively pursued economic ties that benefited Australia's resources sector. In the 2016 Defence White Paper, the Turnbull government welcomed China's continued economic growth and the opportunities this was bringing for Australia and other countries in the Indo-Pacific region.[330] However, it also maintained a cautious approach to regional security issues, many of which emanated from China's growing military capabilities and coercive behaviour, reinforcing Australia's alliance with the United States and strategic partnerships with Japan and other regional powers. This alignment was part of a strategic effort to counterbalance China's expanding influence in the Indo-Pacific, especially concerning maritime disputes in the South China Sea.

Meanwhile, Turnbull grew increasingly concerned about the influence and interference activities of

the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) within Australia and across the region, specifically regarding foreign investments and political connections. The event that opened Turnbull's eyes was the revelation of close links between the CCP and an Australian Labor senator.[331] It was alleged that the senator supported China's stance in the South China Sea dispute in exchange for receiving a donation from a Chinese company closely linked with the CCP.[332] The senator responded to these allegations by announcing that he would resign from the Senate.[333] The Chinese state-run media criticised Australian politicians for denouncing the incident, saying that Australian politicians are full of prejudice against China and that Australia is "looking for an imaginary enemy".[334]

Turnbull was concerned about Chinese influence and interference in domestic politics and announced the *National Security Legislation Amendment* (*Espionage and Foreign Interference, EFI Act*) and the *Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme* (*FITS*) *Act* to strengthen interference laws.[335] Turnbull acknowledged that some organisations in Australia were associated with the CCP.[336] He stressed that the key purpose of these acts was to disclose the links the CCP had formed in Australia.[337] The Chinese Embassy in Australia responded by accusing Australian Government officials of making irresponsible remarks and damaging mutual trust between Australia and China.[338]

The EFI Act amended existing offences in the *Criminal Code Act* 1995 and introduced new spying offences, updated sabotage offences and a new offence relating to the theft of trade secrets on behalf of a foreign government.[339] Some of the actions it criminalised included covert and deceptive or threatening activities by persons intending to interfere with Australia's democratic systems and processes, and supporting the intelligence activities of a foreign government.[340] Meanwhile, the *FITS Act* created a register for individuals or entities undertaking certain activities, or "registrable activities," under the scheme if they are taken on behalf of a "foreign principal." A "foreign principal" includes a foreign government, political organisation, government-related entity or government-related individual. "Registrable activities" include parliamentary lobbying, general political lobbying, communications activities, and disbursement activity (payment of money or things of value).[341]

Under Turnbull, Australia experienced an increase in Chinese espionage penetration of Australia's IT networks, including that of the federal parliament, the Bureau of Meteorology, and the Australian National University.[342] In response to this, Australia became the first country in the 'Five Eyes' intelligence grouping to issue security guidelines requiring its telecommunications carriers to avoid purchasing fifth generation (5G) equipment and services from the Chinese company Huawei, and later from ZTE.[343] Both Huawei and ZTE were reportedly banned because of national security concerns.[344] This was a significant step to take. Huawei Technologies, the world's largest telecommunications and consumer equipment supplier, has been involved in the Australian network since 2004 and has built a base of 700 staff in Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne, and Perth. With $600 million in profits locally, it was a major network equipment supplier in Australia.[345] ZTE, a Chinese state-owned corporation specialising in telecommunication, has also been involved in Australia's telecommunication industry. As of that time, the company had been providing cell phones and mobile broadband devices to Telstra, Australia's leading telecommunications company, for sale in Australia under the Telstra brand for over 13 years.[346]

Morrison's China policy (2018-2022)

Scott Morrison managed Australia-China relations by navigating the growing tension between economic interdependence and national security concerns but leaned harder into the latter than his predecessors. Morrison's approach, marked by assertive policies and strategic alignments, reflected a shift in Australia's China strategy that elevated national security considerations over economic expediency. This recalibration positioned Australia more prominently within alliances that counterbalance China's influence while enduring economic ramifications for prioritising national sovereignty and security. Morrison's policies engaged directly with many of China's core interests and, in the process, crossed several of Beijing's red lines. Much like Turnbull's, this approach reflected an acknowledgment that Australia's policy shift was driven by fundamental changes in China's diplomatic tone and behaviour within the Indo-Pacific region.[347] Central to Morrison's strategy was the dichotomy he framed as "sovereignty versus surrender," underscoring the imperative of defending Australia's national sovereignty against perceived threats from China.[348]

Prime Minister Scott Morrison recognised the positive impact of China's rise and emphasised that the Australia-China relationship should not be dominated by areas of disagreement, but should seek to create room for cooperation on common interests.

One of Morrison's defining moves came in 2018, when, as treasurer, he oversaw the decision to ban Chinese telecommunications firms Huawei and ZTE from Australia's 5G network.[349] This ban was based on concerns that these companies, bound by China's National Security Law of 2017, could be compelled to provide data to Chinese intelligence agencies, presenting a security risk to critical infrastructure. Chinese companies cannot refuse when the CCP's Ministry of State Security orders them to do so.[350] By blocking Huawei and ZTE, Australia signalled a firm stance on cybersecurity, becoming the first nation to exclude Chinese technology from its core telecommunications networks in the Five Eyes alliance. This decision was a harbinger of a shift in the balance of Australia's China policy from economic pragmatism to security vigilance.

Even so, Morrison did not give up on economic engagement with China. China remained Australia's largest trading partner, especially in areas such as iron ore and agriculture. He supported Australia's closer engagement and economic relations with China.[351] For example, when he spoke at Asialink in June 2019, Morrison committed to further strengthening the relationship with China, praising the elevation of the relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2014 and the extensive trade relations developed by the ChAFTA in 2015. He also recognised the positive impact of China's rise and emphasised that the Australia-China relationship should not be dominated by areas of disagreement, but should seek to create room for cooperation on common interests. He mentioned that Australia would continue to welcome China's economic growth.[352] Therefore, Morrison's China policy in 2019 was one of determination to do all it could to repair damaged relations with China.[353] When Morrison visited the Solomon Islands in early June 2019, he emphasised that Australia would not join the diplomatic wrangling between China and Taiwan in the Pacific region.[354]

However, Morrison maintained that national security and sovereignty could not be compromised for economic gains.[355] Such an Australian stance was evident in the territorial dispute between China and its ASEAN neighbours over the South China Sea. Abbott took a vague stance on the issues and limited his remarks to saying that the issue should be resolved peacefully.[356] Morrison, however, made Australia's position clear. In July 2020, Australia formally rejected China's claims to territorial and maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea, saying that there was no legal basis for such claims (Visontay, 2020). In a note verbale dated 23 July, Australia's Permanent Mission to the United Nations clarified Canberra's legal position that the Australian Government rejects any claims by China that are inconsistent with the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, in particular, maritime claims that do not adhere to its rules on baselines, maritime zones and classification of features.[357]

Australia also assumed more forthright positions on matters of China's international engagement. In April 2020, it was reported that a bipartisan group in Australia supported a global investigation into the origins of COVID-19, including China's response to the first outbreak in Wuhan. Marise Payne, then-Foreign Minister, urged China to allow transparency on the issue. She insisted that the COVID-19 issues required international cooperation and that parties and countries also needed to be transparent and ensure that the international community has a credible and independent review mechanism together.[358] Peter Dutton, then-Minister for Home Affairs, said China had an obligation to answer questions and provide information about what happened and called for greater transparency from China about the origins of COVID-19.[359] Morrison also called on several heads of state, including the US, Germany,

and France, to join an international coalition to investigate the pandemic.[360]

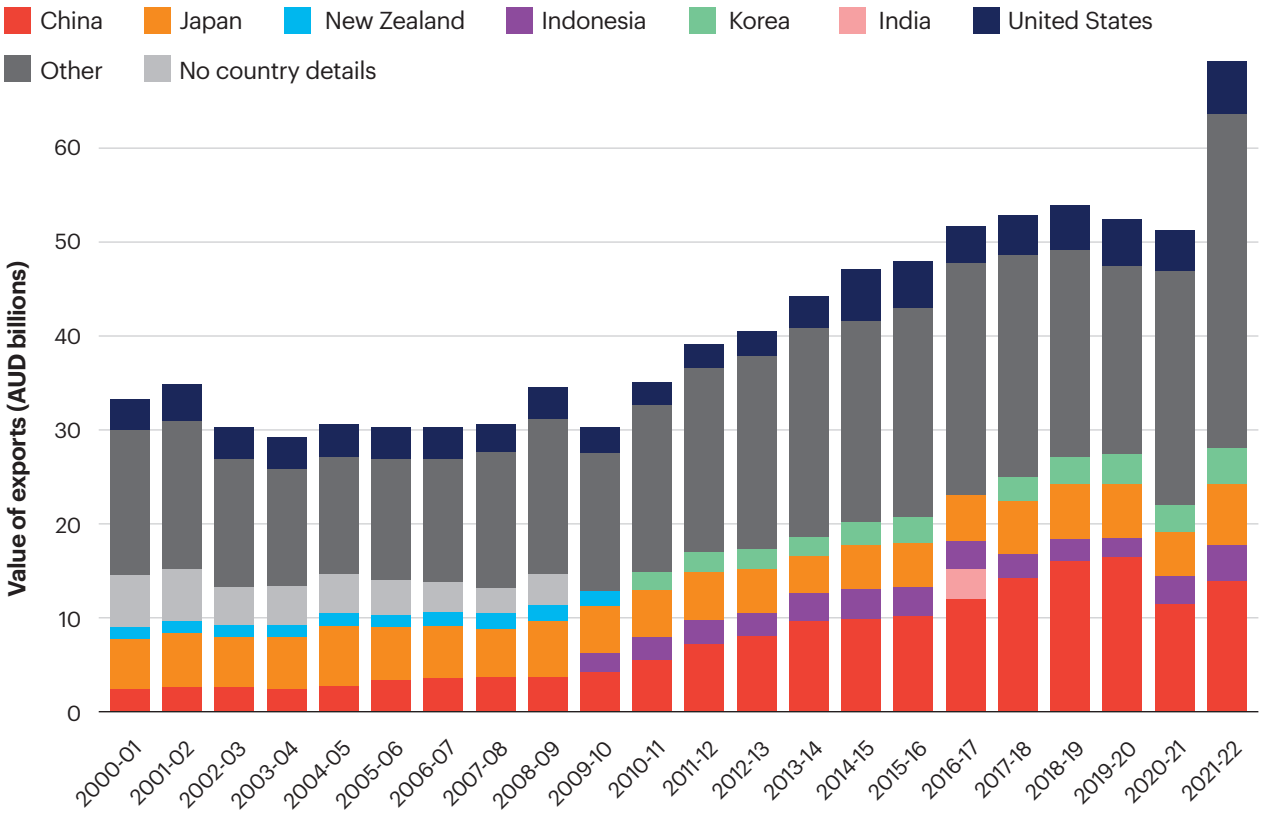
Australia's proposal for the investigation provoked strong opposition, even punishment, from China. Between May and November 2020, China imposed tariffs totalling more than $20 billion on various Australian exports to China, including beef, barley, cotton, mutton, lamb, resources, seafood, sugar, timber, and wine.[361] These measures were significant, given that China had been the largest destination for Australian agriculture, fisheries and forestry (AFF) exports since 2010. As Figure 4 shows, exports to China accounted for 6.84% of total Australian AFF exports in 2000. By 2009, this share had increased to 13.74%, reflecting China's growing importance as a trading partner. A significant shift occurred in 2010, when China became the number one destination for Australian AFF exports, with its share rising to 15.40%. This trend continued, and by 2019, China accounted for 31% of total AFF exports, marking its peak as the leading destination.

After China's tariffs on Australian AFF products, Australia's exports to China of cotton, wheat, lobster, wine, lumber and copper, though not all, fell to nearly zero from the beginning of 2021 (see Figure 5). The share of AFF exports from Australia to China accounted for more than 30% of total exports in 2019, which declined to 22% in 2020 and then to 20% in 2021 (see Figure 6).

Morrison took a firm stand against China's 'wolf warrior diplomacy'. He demonstrated his robust stance in resolving the issue by the rule of law by requesting a World Trade Organization panel to determine whether the tariffs were illegal.[362]

Figure 4.

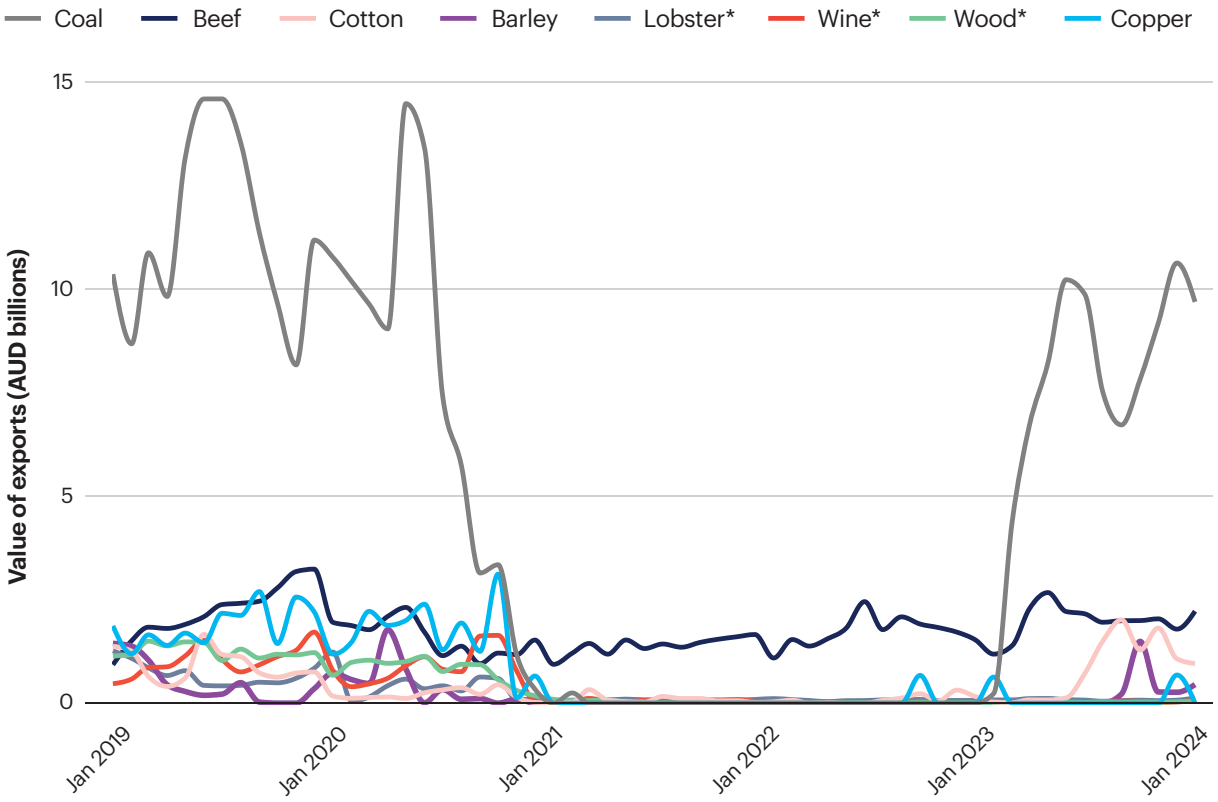
Australia's agriculture, fisheries and forestry exports to China (2000-2022)



Source: Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry.

Figure 5.

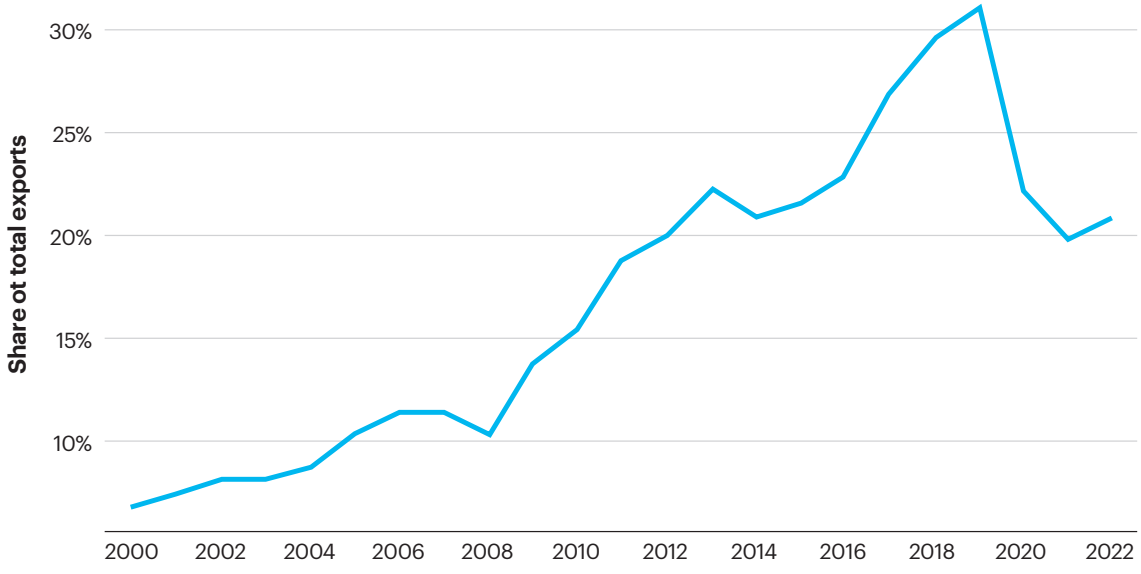
Monthly Australian goods exports to China (2019-2023)



Source: ABS Merchandise Exports by Commodity.
Note: *Denotes export categories that may include other non-coerced products.

Figure 6.

Share in total AFF exports (2000-2022)



Source: Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry.

In November 2020, the Chinese Government presented a formal list of grievances to Australian news outlets, including Nine News, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, and *The Age*. The list of 14 grievances included Australia's call for an independent investigation into the origins of COVID-19, the implementation of the FITS Act and the EFI Act under the Turnbull administration and the prohibition of Huawei and ZTE from participation in Australia's 5G network in 2018.[363]

The actions of Australia included in this list had fallen under China's core interests of Taiwan, Xinjiang, human rights[364] and the South China Sea.[365] The Morrison government clearly expressed its opposition to China's actions in the South China Sea more than Abbott did. Regarding Taiwan, Morrison stated that Australia would support Taiwan if China invaded it.[366] In addition, it took a strong stance on China's human rights issue by expressing concern about the situation of Uyghurs at the United Nations.[367] Due to these policy decisions, Australia-China relations have reached an unprecedented low, characterised by heightened political friction and strategic divergence.

Under the Morrison government, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) evolved into a key strategic alliance to counter China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific. Initially established for disaster response in 2007, the Quad — comprising Japan, the United States, Australia, and India — remained a low-profile dialogue mechanism for over a decade.[368] However, in response to shifting regional dynamics, the Quad intensified its engagement, culminating in the first foreign ministers' meeting in 2019, followed by summits in 2021.[369] Morrison identified the Quad as crucial for Australia's security, characterising it as a framework for candid discussions on regional challenges and economic security, particularly concerning China's investment strategies in Sri Lanka and Cambodia.[370]

Alongside the Quad, AUKUS emerged as a trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, announced in September 2021. Its primary initiative was Australia's acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines to enhance deterrence capabilities.[371] While the agreement did not explicitly target China, Morrison later confirmed that countering China's assertiveness was a key motivation.[372] China condemned AUKUS as an "extremely irresponsible" initiative that undermined regional stability.[373]

Conclusion: What should Japan take from Australia's evolving China policy?

Australia's evolving approach to China offers valuable insights for Japan in balancing economic interdependence with national security imperatives. The trajectory of Australia's China policy — ranging from Abbott's pragmatic approach to Turnbull's countermeasures against foreign influence and Scott Morrison's prioritisation of security alliances — illustrates the necessity of adaptive policy frameworks in response to China's shifting role in the Indo-Pacific region. A critical lesson for Japan lies in the establishment of robust legislative and institutional frameworks to counter foreign interference. Australia's introduction of the *EFI Act* and *FITS Act* underscores the role of legal mechanisms in safeguarding national security. Japan may face challenges in enhancing intelligence cooperation with key allies, including Australia, without comparable legislative measures.

Australia's firm stance within AUKUS and the Quad also highlights the strategic importance of collective security cooperation in counterbalancing China's strategic manoeuvres. Japan can strengthen its own regional posture by deepening military interoperability with key allies, particularly through strategic partnerships with Australia within frameworks such as the Quad and diversifying economic partnerships through the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership to reduce overdependence on China. The acceleration of discussions on AUKUS Pillar II, which focuses on cooperation in advanced technologies, is essential for deepening security collaboration. A 'Special Strategic Partnership' between Japan and Australia can reinforce its regional presence by adopting a more proactive diplomatic strategy that actively engages Southeast Asian and Pacific nations, thereby countering growing Chinese influence in the region.

Japan's security crisis response framework: A primer for a new era of threats

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Executive summary

- Japan's security crisis response framework is a critical element of its national defence.[374] It involves a complex, multi-layered bureaucracy and specific legal triggers, but importantly, remains untested by modern armed conflict.
- The system's practical effectiveness in an existential security crisis hinges crucially on decisive political leadership, particularly from the Prime Minister. Key vulnerabilities also challenge the system, including fragmented laws distinguishing disaster response from civil protection, and difficulties responding to ambiguous grey-zone threats.
- Understanding this intricate architecture is vital for indispensable partners, such as Australia, that are bound by the 2022 Joint Declaration to consult on contingencies. Key elements include decision-making bodies (National Security Council, National Security Secretariat), a phased security crisis response process often requiring parliamentary approval and operational responsibilities of the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- Notably, the Ministry of Defense's operational control and command structure have been enhanced by the recent establishment of the permanent Japan Joint Operations Command. Further, while legal adherence is crucial for legitimacy, expert opinion suggests legal frameworks might be interpreted flexibly *after* core political or military decisions are made, particularly in novel or extreme crises.
- A working-level understanding of these intricacies — the formal structures, evolving capabilities, potential legal adaptability under pressure and the vital role of leadership — is essential for Australia to effectively support and coordinate with Japan during regional security contingencies. This report details these elements to aid that understanding.

Introduction

In August 2024, a Chinese military aircraft was identified in Japanese airspace near Nagasaki Prefecture, marking the first known incursion by China into Japan's territorial airspace. Since then, Chinese and Russian forces have continued to intrude into Japan's territory — both in the air and by sea.[375]

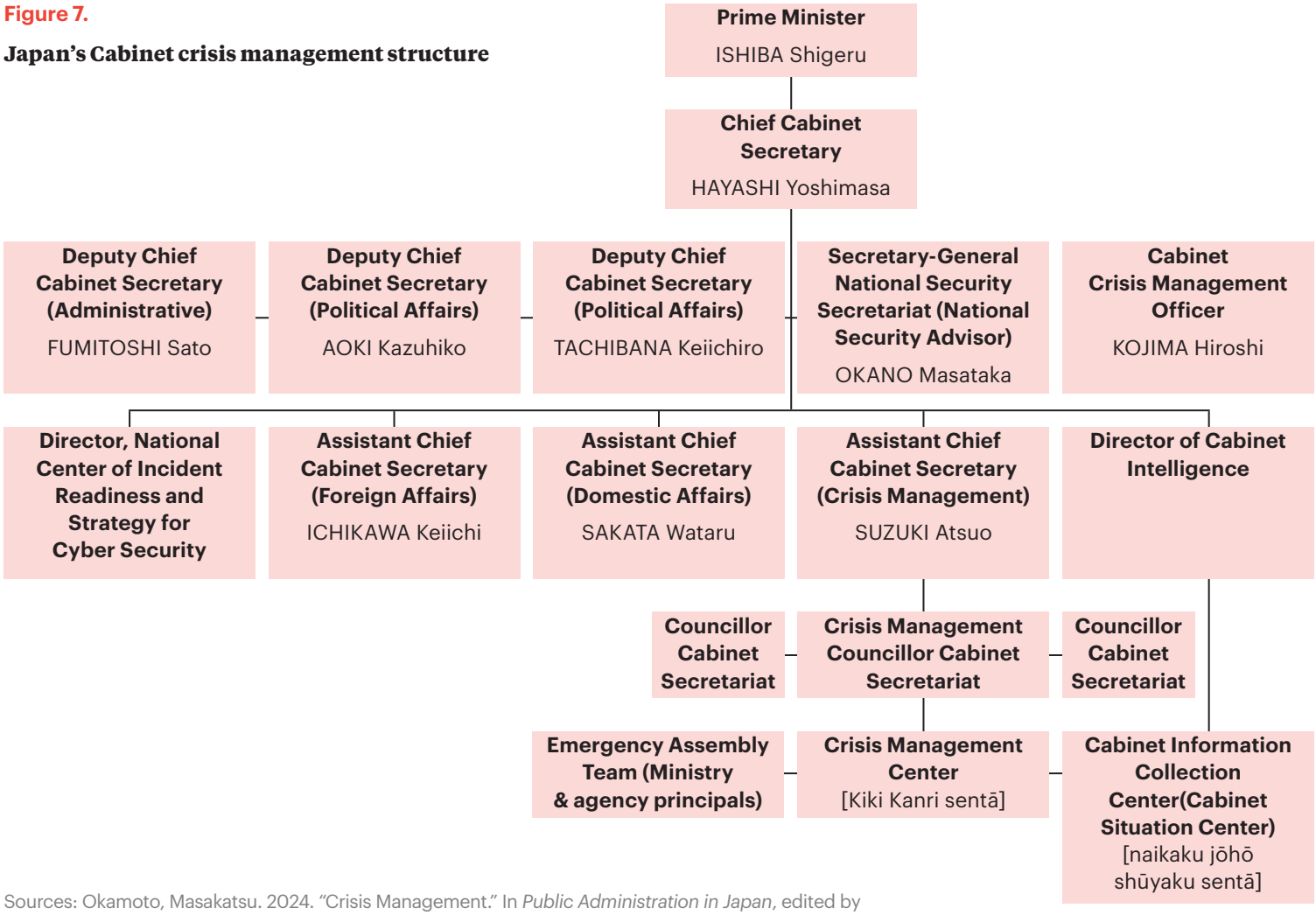
These incursions pose unprecedented challenges for Japan's security crisis response system, which has not been tested by an armed attack since the Second World War. Over the last two decades, a system has been developed to address contingencies, encompassing both actual and anticipated armed attack situations.[376]

Given Australia and Japan's increasingly close defence and security relationship — exemplified by their commitment in the 2022 Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation to 'consult each other on contingencies that may affect our sovereignty and regional security interests and consider measures in response'[377] — Australia needs a clear understanding of Japan's response options to national security crises. This understanding is crucial as both countries strive to deepen operational cooperation.

Japan's response system involves a multi-layered bureaucracy with ingrained procedures and responsibilities that appear to overlap. This article will map the central government components responsible for initial crisis decision-making, describe the response procedure to a contingency and provide an overview of the legal factors shaping a response. While these components will play a major role in a crisis, the leadership of individuals within the system — particularly the prime minister, chief cabinet secretary and national security advisor — will be crucial to the practical application of this process, adding a layer of unpredictability to the system's effectiveness (Figure 7).

Figure 7.

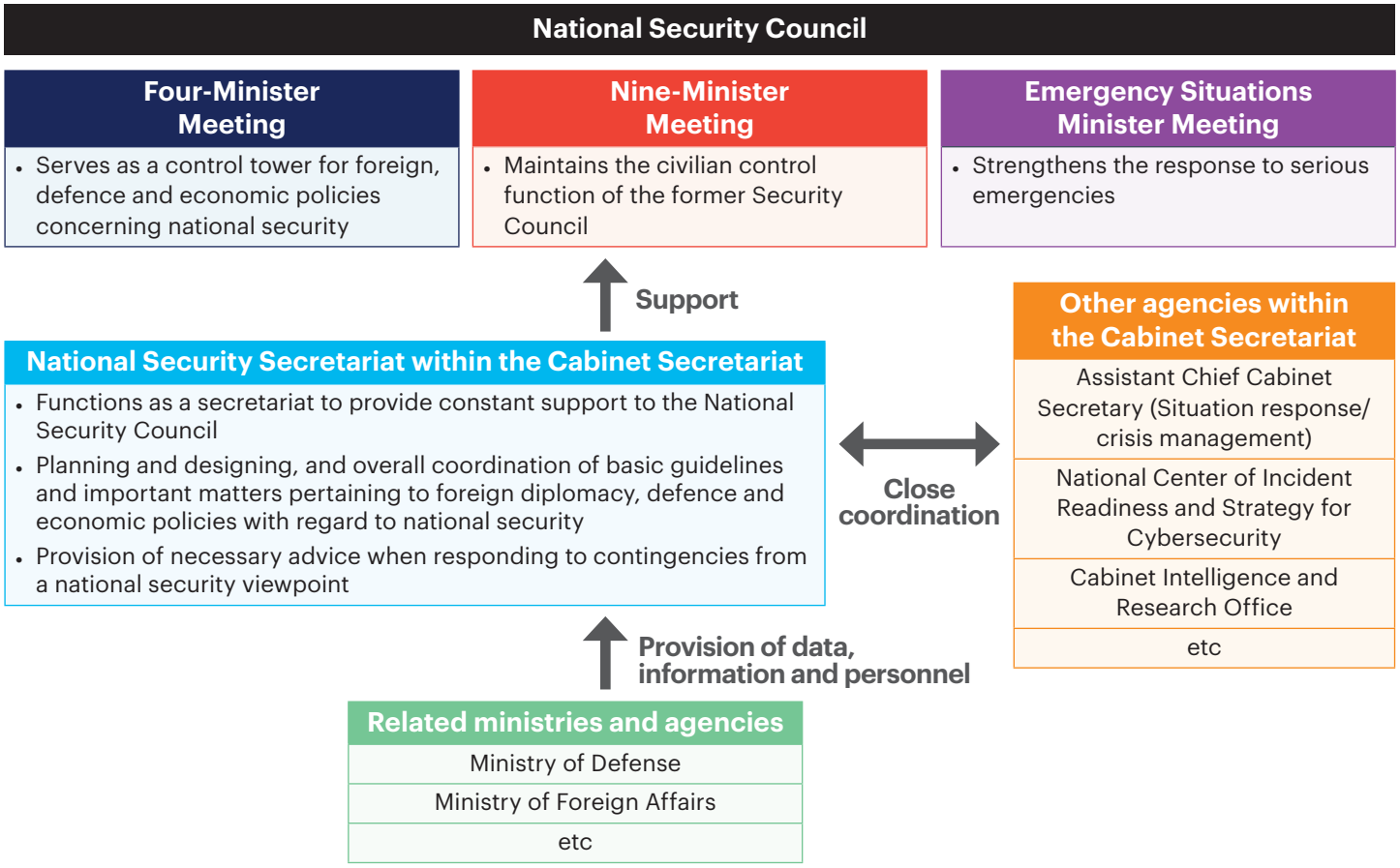
Japan's Cabinet crisis management structure



Sources: Okamoto, Masakatsu. 2024. "Crisis Management." In *Public Administration in Japan*, edited by Koichiro Agata, Hiroaki Inatsugu, and Hideaki Shiroyama. Birmingham: Palgrave Macmillan. Cabinet Secretariat of Japan. 2024. "幹部紹介" [Executive Introduction]. https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/gaiyou/kanbu/index.html.

Figure 8.

Structure to support Japan's National Security Council



Source: Ministry of Defense of Japan. 2024. *Defense of Japan 2024*. Tokyo.

Who calls the shots? Crisis decision-making in Japan

This analysis focuses on a high-level overview of the parts of the Japanese Government responsible for the initial response to a security incident, such as an armed attack against Japanese territory. Decision-making in the first hours and days of the crisis would be facilitated by the Japanese National Security Council (JNSC), which includes the prime minister, security-related ministers and the Cabinet Secretariat — all central points of control in the Japanese political system (Figure 8).[378]

The JNSC, established in 2013, is designed to ensure the prime minister can swiftly gather key decision-makers to address major security threats, aiming to reduce the risk of miscalculation and foster more decisive and informed responses.[379] It facilitates rapid information flow, and serves as a key contact point for foreign governments — especially the US National Security Council. The JNSC shapes the initial response by framing the situation and setting the agenda for interagency discussions. Ultimately, the JNSC's goal is to ensure a unified response among all stakeholders.[380] The JNSC's expertise and access to information give its recommendations ballast, particularly in the early stages of a crisis when the prime minister relies on the JNSC for clear policy options.[381]

In addition to the JNSC, another key component of Japan's security crisis response mechanism is the National Security Secretariat (NSS), which sits within the Cabinet Secretariat (Figure 8). The NSS was established in 2014 to support the JNSC and is staffed with personnel on secondment from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), Ministry of Defense (MOD) and the National Police Agency (NPA). In a security crisis it is responsible for coordinating inter-agency processes, ensuring policy alignment with Japan's National Security Strategy, and managing information and intelligence sharing between government agencies. The NSS would be another key liaison point between Tokyo and Washington in a crisis via the national security advisors of both countries.[382] This coordinating function gives the NSS influence in shaping the crisis response options that are put to

the JNSC. Because of the NSS's central role, seconded personnel from MOD, MOFA and NPA are generally experienced and senior policy hands with good communication channels back to their home agency's senior officials. They also tend to have broad international experience, having studied or been posted overseas.[383] As a result, through their secondees, MOD, MOFA and NPA retain strong influence in shaping the NSS's input to the JNSC.[384]

While the JNSC and NSS provide crucial advisory and coordination roles, ultimate decision-making authority in a security crisis rests with the Cabinet, primarily the prime minister, foreign minister, defense minister and chief cabinet secretary. The prime minister bears the heaviest responsibility for leading the response.

Anatomy of a crisis: How Japan responds

Even though Japan's system remains untested by an existential threat, analysing a generalised crisis response process offers valuable insights. This analysis illuminates the key decision-makers, reveals the hierarchical — vertical and horizontal — structure of the response system and highlights the potential factors shaping Japan's actions. For an Australian audience, this understanding is crucial, despite the likelihood of real-world deviations from the generalised model.

Assessing the threat

In the initial stages of the crisis response (Figure 9), the government prioritises information gathering and analysis. This includes details on the nature of the crisis, the potential consequences of different courses of action and perspectives of key stakeholders, including the United States and Australia.

The Cabinet Information Gathering Centre (naikaku jōhō shūyaku sentā), known informally as the Situation Centre, operates a 24-hour shift monitoring for domestic and international emergencies.[385] If the incident is a ballistic missile attack, Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) or US capabilities will identify the event and alert decision-makers and the Situation Centre. Once a security incident occurs, the Situation Centre transmits information to the Cabinet Crisis Management Centre. Also operating 24/7, the Crisis Management Centre becomes the initial response headquarters.[386]

Developing a response strategy

If the Crisis Management Centre assesses the incident as high-risk, it establishes a Cabinet Response Office (Kantei taisakushitsu).[387] This office is chaired by the Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary for Crisis Management and is only established for the immediate crisis response.[388] In 2023, three Cabinet Response Offices were established in response to Chinese Maritime Police Bureau vessels approaching Senkaku waters.[389]

Concurrently, an Emergency Assembly Team (kinkyū sanshū chīmu) is established.[390] Comprising heads of relevant ministries and agencies, this team convenes at the Prime Minister's Office to coordinate initial response measures.[391] In the early stages of responding to a security crisis, these two teams — the Cabinet Response Office and the Emergency Assembly Team — are the key decision-making bodies.[392] They assess the intelligence gathered by the Cabinet Crisis Management Centre and recommend to the prime minister whether or not the situation warrants escalating to the JNSC.

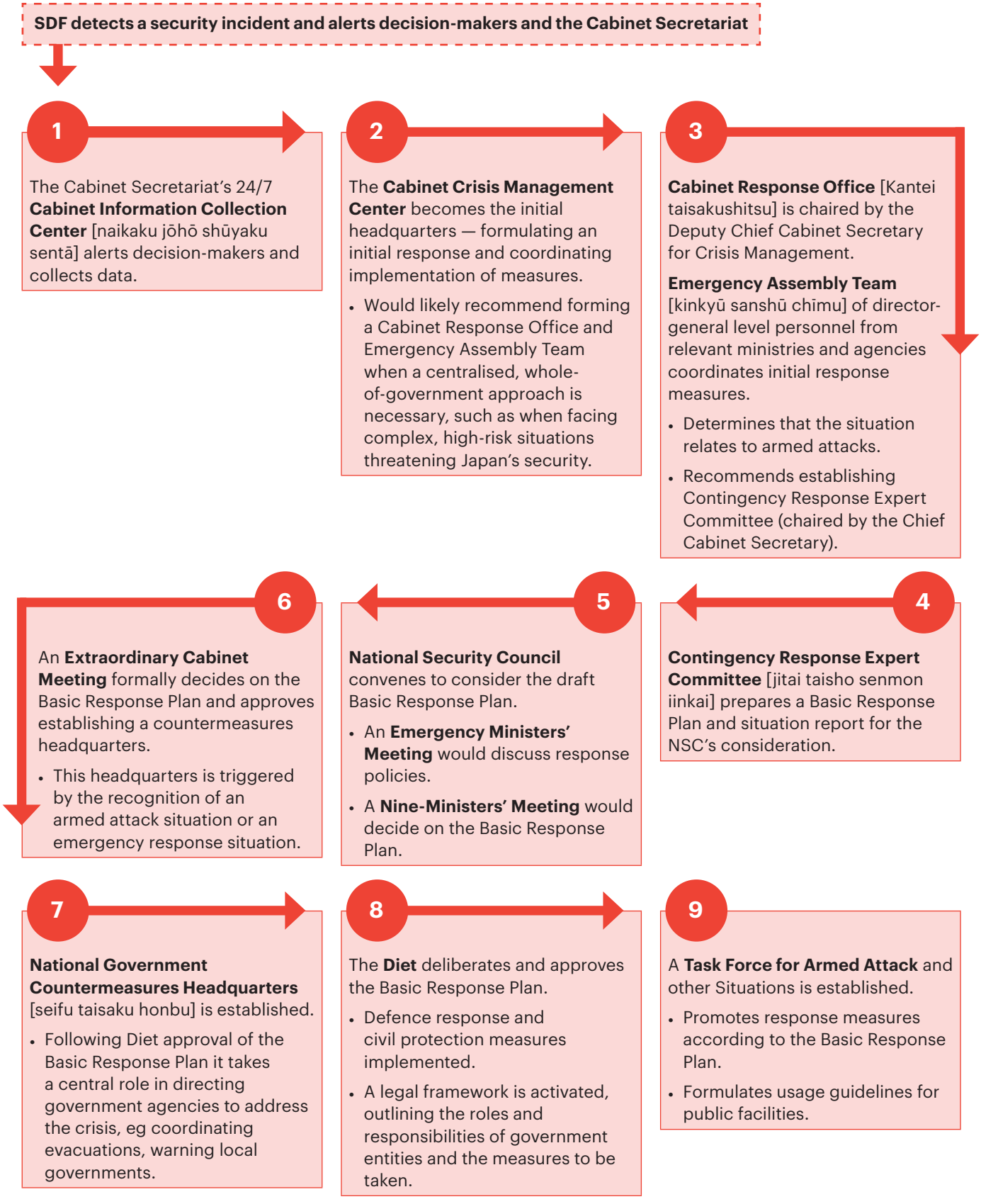
The prime minister's call

Following a recommendation to convene the JNSC, a Contingency Response Expert Committee (jitai taisho senmon iinkai) is formed. This committee is a subsidiary body to the JNSC and is chaired by the Chief Cabinet Secretary. Membership often overlaps with the Emergency Assembly Team.[393] The expert committee sends a situation report to the JNSC, and the prime minister decides which NSC meeting format is most appropriate to consider the initial response.

In a complex, unprecedented situation it is likely the prime minister would convene a Four-Minister Meeting of the prime minister, the chief cabinet secretary, and the ministers of defence and foreign affairs (Figure 8).[394] This would be the most efficient format to share sensitive information and make speedy decisions. The Four-Minister Meeting would be the core grouping but may include a 'plus alpha' at the prime minister's discretion, with other ministers, senior military officers and experts invited to participate, depending on the situation. The meeting would ensure the crisis response aligns with Japan's strategic interests and national security policy objectives.

Figure 9.

Japan's security crisis response flow



Sources: Takeda, Yasuhiro, Jun Ito, and Yusuke Kawashima. 2024. *Civil Defense in Japan: Issues and Challenges*. London: Routledge; Okamoto, Masakatsu. 2024. "Crisis Management." In *Public Administration in Japan*. Birmingham: Palgrave Macmillan; Ministry of Defense of Japan. 2024. *Defense of Japan 2024*. Tokyo; Oriki, Ryoichi, and Masafumi Kaneko. 2015. "国家安全保障会議—評価と提言" [National Security Council: Assessment and Proposals]. Seisaku Shinkutanku PHP Sōken "Kokka Anzen Hoshō Kaigi Kenshō" Purojekuto. PHP Research Institute, November 26.

Alternatively, the prime minister may decide to convene an Emergency Situations Ministers Meeting (kinkyū jitai daijin kaigō). Japan has only convened this meeting once and it was during the COVID-19 pandemic.[395] The meeting format includes senior military officers, ensuring regular and institutionalised input from the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) in the Council's response decision-making.

The JNSC tasks the Contingency Response Expert Committee to develop a Basic Response Plan. This plan is a crucial part of Japan's security crisis management approach — setting the parameters that will guide the actions of the entire government at the national and local levels — as well as the JSDF. It outlines the justification for the government's response, establishes JSDF operational authorities and enables the government to compel local authorities to cooperate.[396] The expert committee's power to draft the Basic Response Plan gives it significant influence in shaping the overall direction and legal basis for the government's response to the crisis.

Then, a JNSC 'Nine-Minister Meeting' — including a wider range of cabinet members responsible for internal affairs, finance, economy and national public safety — convenes to declare an armed attack situation (or an alternative legally defined 'situation' — see Figure 10) and formally decide on the Basic Response Plan.[397]

Parliamentary oversight — balancing speed and accountability

Following JNSC consideration, an Extraordinary Cabinet Meeting would formally endorse the Basic Response Plan. While not legally mandated, achieving consensus among key ministers is crucial for the prime minister to lead the Cabinet in making critical security decisions. Following this a National Government Countermeasures Headquarters (seifu taisaku honbu) is established.[398] This will become the principal headquarters for coordinating the response to the crisis.

Finally, the Diet (Japan's parliament) deliberates the Basic Response Plan, and after receiving Diet approval, the prime minister may order a defence operation to restore security and ensure civil protection.[399] While the Diet's approval is necessary for major deployments or the use of force, its power is primarily one of oversight and legitimisation. In many scenarios, the prime minister can act first and seek Diet approval later, highlighting the executive branch's dominance in security crisis response (Figure 10).

Operationalising decisions

Ministry of Defense

Throughout this process, the MOD and MOFA play crucial roles advising government via the NSS and NSC. The MOD, through the JSDF, would be responsible for gathering, synthesising and assessing information about the unfolding crisis; deploying forces for defence, rescue or evacuation operations; and engaging in direct military action. These responsibilities grant the MOD a high degree of operational control during a crisis. The JSDF's ability to gather and assess information shapes the government's understanding of the situation, while its authority to deploy forces and engage in military action makes it a key player in executing the chosen response.

In particular, the establishment of the Japan Joint Operations Command (JJOC) this year represents a significant shift in Japan's defence posture, enhancing the MOD's operational control during crises.[400] The JJOC provides a permanent joint headquarters responsible for overseeing all JSDF joint operations, from peacetime through to contingencies. The command reports directly to the defense minister and is empowered to request forces from the service chiefs. Senior associate of Japan Chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Christopher B. Johnstone, argues that this streamlined structure will enable the MOD to exercise more direct and effective control over JSDF operations during a crisis.[401] The JJOC centralises command authority, eliminating the need for ad-hoc task forces and simplifying the decision-making process. Crucially for crisis response, the JJOC will assume the operational command of all JSDF joint operations, freeing the Chief of the JSDF to focus on providing strategic military advice to the Prime Minister and Defense Minister.[402]

The JJOC is modelled on Australia's joint command system,[403] where a single commander oversees all joint operations. This approach differs from the US model, which relies on theatre and functional combatant commanders. Johnstone argues that the choice of the Australian model reflects Japan's desire for a more streamlined and integrated command structure, better suited to its security needs for a military force that can deploy to the region.[404]

Ministry of Foreign Affairs

MOFA also plays a key role during the crisis response. It leads diplomatic efforts — communicating with foreign governments, coordinating international assistance and managing public messaging on the international stage.[405] This gives MOFA a strong influencing hand in shaping the international narrative and securing support during a crisis. By controlling diplomatic channels and managing public messaging, MOFA can influence how the crisis is perceived globally and build international consensus for Japan's actions.

Additionally, the Armed Attack Situations Response Act (2003) (Buryoku kōgeki jitai-tō e no taisho ni kansuru hōritsu)[406] sets out that in responding to situations of armed attack and other threats to Japan's existence, Japan should cooperate closely with the United States based on the Japan-US Security Treaty, as well as with other relevant countries to gain the understanding and cooperative action of the international community, including the United Nations.[407] Japan would also seek to consult and cooperate with Australia, based on the 2022 Joint Declaration.

Despite this seemingly flexible approach, decision-makers would still need to carefully balance a robust security response with the country's laws and norms — particularly the constraints imposed by Japan's Constitution.

How the Constitution shapes Japan's crisis response

While the previous section outlined the procedural steps involved in Japan's security crisis response, it's crucial to understand the legal framework that underpins these actions. It is important to note that the legal guidelines on the use of force are not the starting point for crisis response. Rather, most Japanese experts argue that in an existential security crisis, the prime minister would decide what to do based on political and military advice and then turn to the legal framework to provide justification for the decision.[408] In novel crisis situations it is even possible that the government may seek to reinterpret the application of laws such as the *Armed Attack Situations Response Act* to enable the desired response.[409]

Despite this seemingly flexible approach, decision-makers would still need to carefully balance a robust security response with the country's laws and norms — particularly the constraints imposed by Japan's Constitution. Article 9 of the Constitution renounces war and the threat or use of force, limiting Japan's military response options.[410]

Ultimately, determining the legal basis for a security crisis response is an essential part of the process. With a legal mandate for the government's proposed action, the prime minister can seek approval from the Diet, secure support across all levels of government and ensure the JSDF's actions are legal. Once the legal settings of the response plan are agreed to, all elements of the security crisis system will seek to strictly adhere to these settings.[411] It is for this reason that understanding the broad contours of Japan's legal settings underpinning its crisis response system is crucial.

A divided system — Japan's separate frameworks for disasters and attacks

Historical legacies and constitutional constraints have led to a fragmented crisis management system with distinct legal frameworks for different types of threats. Japan recognises two broad categories of crisis: 'disaster management' (bōsai),[412] addressing natural and technological disasters, and 'civil protection' (kokumin-hogo),[413] which covers human-made crises, such as armed attacks and terrorism. These hazards are further divided into sub-categories, each with specific laws and agencies.[414]

A victim on a stretcher being moved to an ambulance at Tsukiji subway station following a sarin gas attack by doomsday cult Aum Supreme Truth (Aum Shinrikyo) in Tokyo, March 1995. Source: Getty

This compartmentalised approach complicates crisis response, especially during novel or complex emergencies with overlapping threats. For example, the same type of damage, such as infrastructure destruction, might trigger different responses and support mechanisms depending on whether it's classified as a disaster or a civil protection event. This requires the government to make a clear determination of the hazard type before acting, potentially delaying response efforts. This delay was seen during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic when the government struggled to identify whether it fit into the 'disaster' or 'civil protection' category, leading to confusion and a slow response.[415]

Evolution of a framework — from reaction to proactive security

Legal and administrative frameworks for national security threats have developed gradually, often reacting to events that exposed systemic gaps. For example, the 1995 Sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway underscored the need for better preparedness for security emergencies.[416] This event sparked a series of reforms, and in the early 2000s the Koizumi administration implemented a comprehensive overhaul of the security crisis management system with the introduction of the *2003 Armed Attack Situations Response Act* and the *2004 Civil Protection Act*. The *2003 Armed Attack Situations Response Act* codified Japan's approach to national security threats, outlining how the government should respond to various levels of armed aggression, ranging from localised terrorist attacks to full-scale invasions. The *2004 Civil Protection Act* establishes a broader framework for responding to a range of national emergencies allowing for some restrictions on private rights to protect citizens' lives and property.[417]

From peace to war — the legal steps to deploying the JSDF

Authorising military force in Japan requires a complex balance: enabling a robust defence while upholding constitutional restrictions. To navigate this complex landscape, Japan has developed a set of guiding principles for authorising military force. These are the **'three principles'** (san yōken) —

which hold a narrow interpretation of 'self-defence' and lay down strict conditions for when the JSDF can conduct operations.[418]

1. **Existential threat:** Japan must be facing an armed attack against itself or a close ally that threatens Japan's survival.
2. **No other option:** Force can only be used as a last resort when no other appropriate means are available to repel the attack and ensure Japan's survival and the protection of its people.
3. **Minimum necessary force:** The response must be proportional to the threat and limited to the minimum extent necessary for self-defence.[419]

While upholding Japan's traditional pacifist values, these principles impose strict limitations on the JSDF's use of force, potentially hindering responses to situations requiring pre-emptive action or grey-zone activities — such as cyberattacks, economic coercion or using fishing vessels to harass Japanese ships — which blur the lines between peacetime law enforcement and wartime use of force.

The three principles have shaped the development of laws governing the JSDF's actions, each tailored to different scenarios and threats (Figure 10).

1. Anticipated armed-attack situation: preparing for a possible attack

In these situations, an attack hasn't occurred, but tensions are high. An attack is considered likely, even without concrete actions from the aggressor. The threat must be imminent and serious enough to warrant a mobilisation of forces to prepare for hostile actions that are clearly being telegraphed. This category allows Tokyo to take proactive measures before an attack materialises.[420]

- **Process:** The government assesses the situation, drafts a Basic Response Plan and facilitates the plan's approval by the Cabinet and the Diet. This process is time-consuming but aims to ensure careful deliberation and prevent rash decisions.
- **Powers:** When an anticipated armed-attack situation is declared, the JSDF has the authority to reposition forces to prepare for an attack. This preparation includes constructing facilities to prepare to counter an attack. The JSDF is also authorised to provide logistical support to US forces, including supplies, transportation, communications, repair facilities, medical services, use of airports and seaports and access to military bases. The JSDF may also supply ammunition to US forces.[421] Lastly, the JSDF may recall reserve personnel to active duty.[422]

2. Armed-attack situation: when the threat is imminent

This condition applies when an attack on Japan is occurring or imminent, including events such as landings by foreign forces, missile strikes and attacks by special forces or guerillas.

The JSDF can be deployed immediately to defend the country.

- **Process:** Even with an attack underway, the government still must follow certain procedures, including seeking cabinet and Diet approval for a Basic Response Plan. But **in an emergency the prime minister can order the JSDF to act first and seek approval through the Diet later**. However, the prime minister must suspend all operations immediately should the Diet revoke the Basic Response Plan.

While upholding Japan's traditional pacifist values, these principles impose strict limitations on the JSDF's use of force, potentially hindering responses to situations requiring pre-emptive action or grey-zone activities.

Figure 10.

Japan's security framework: Categorising threats

Emergency response situation	Important influence situation	Anticipated armed attack situation	Armed attack situation	Survival-threatening situation
Defined in the Civil Protection Act (2004) [国民保護法] and Armed Attack Situations Response Act (2003) [武力攻撃事態等対処法].	Defined in the Critical Impact Situation and Security Act (2016) [重要影響事態安全確保法].	Defined in Armed Attack Situations Response Act (2003) [武力攻撃事態等対処法].	Defined in the Armed Attack Situations Response Act (2003) [武力攻撃事態等対処法] and Civil Protection Act (2004) [国民保護法].	Defined in the Peace and Security Legislation Development Act (2015) [平和安全法制整備法].
• Covers situations posing a serious threat to the safety of Japan and its citizens, eg attacks on nuclear power plants or crowded facilities, attacks with lethal materials, or attacks using transportation for destruction. • Applies to localised, short-lived situations, lasting hours or days. • Designed to allow a smooth transition from disaster preparedness to emergency preparedness. • Local governments given degree of autonomy in responding to these situations. • Likely faster response time compared to situations requiring more extensive coordination or deliberations at the national level.	• Includes situations that, if left unaddressed, could pose a serious threat to Japan's peace and security, including situations that could escalate into a direct armed attack on Japan. • These situations may persist for weeks, months or even longer, and their impact can range from multiple prefectures to nationwide. • Includes a wide range of threats, from maritime incursions to cyberattacks. • Designed to allow wide-area evacuation in anticipated armed attack situations. • Provides legal framework for SDF to engage in activities like logistics support for foreign militaries.	• This is a preparedness measure, enabling deterrence and proactive responses such as evacuation before an attack. • The aggressor has not yet taken concrete, tangible steps towards an attack. • Declaring this situation involves complex political and strategic considerations with extensive coordination and deliberations at multiple levels of government.	• Covers situations where an armed attack against Japan has already occurred or where clear and imminent danger of such an attack is perceived. • Encompasses the gravest forms of kinetic attack directed against Japan.	• Applies when armed attack occurs against a foreign country that is in a close relationship with Japan, threatening Japan's survival and posing a clear danger of fundamentally overturning Japanese people's right to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. • Allows exercise of limited collective self-defence under strict conditions. • Criteria for designating this situation remain vague.
Requires: NSC deliberation, Diet approval and a Cabinet decision to recognise this situation.	**Requires:** NSC deliberation and a Cabinet decision to recognise this situation.	**Requires:** NSC deliberation, PM formulates Basic Response Plan, Cabinet decision, Diet approval.	**Requires:** PM formulates Basic Response Plan, then NSC, Cabinet, Diet review and approval. PM can then issue Defence Operation order.	**Requires:** PM formulates Basic Response Plan, then NSC and Cabinet approval. PM may order a Defence Operation, then retrospective Diet approval.
SDF powers: support local government response as requested.	**SDF powers:** provide logistical support activities to foreign armed forces, conduct search and rescue, conduct ship inspection operations against smuggling, piracy or terrorism.	**SDF powers:** PM can issue Defence Operation order for SDF to reposition forces, undertake readiness exercises and prepare for potential combat operations. Use of force prohibited.	**SDF powers:** assumes expanded authority to ensure national security, encompassing powers beyond use of force. Minister of Defense gains command and control of the Japan Coast Guard. SDF still constrained by proportionality and necessity principles.	**SDF powers:** may use force, including counterstrikes, but a clear danger must threaten Japan's national survival, no alternative means of addressing the threat exist, and force must be limited to minimum necessary.

- **Powers:** The JSDF is authorised to use the 'necessary force to defend [the] country' (Article 88 of the Japan Self-Defense Forces Law).[423] The Minister of Defense has the power to command and control the Japan Coast Guard but cannot use it for military operations. The JSDF may also requisition civilian facilities like hospitals, vehicle maintenance facilities, shipyards and port facilities. It may also seize private property, including homes. The JSDF may conduct naval operations to prevent neutral ships from carrying military supplies to an enemy state. This includes forcing foreign ships to enter Japanese ports for inspection.[424]

3. Survival-threatening situation: defending allies, protecting Japan

This power was introduced in 2015 under the *Peace and Security Legislation* to enable Japan to defend its allies, particularly the United States, even if Japan is not directly attacked itself. The Japanese Government has been reluctant to define what would meet the requirements of a Survival-Threatening Situation.[425] For example, Japan is uncertain — publicly at least — if an attack on South Korea or US Forces Korea by North Korea would justify invoking a survival-threatening situation.[426]

- **Conditions:** Japan can engage in limited collective self-defence of a 'close ally', such as the United States if a three-part test can be satisfied: (1) Japan's survival must be under threat; (2) no alternative means exist to address the threat; and (3) any force used must be the minimum necessary.
- **Process:** This situation necessitates a Cabinet decision, Diet approval and a subsequent defence operation order **before the JSDF is authorised to use force**.[427]

Use of weapons in situations short of war: how Japan responds to ambiguity

Japan faces a growing challenge from grey-zone activities.[428] But the government's response to hostile state actions short of war is complicated by the lack of legal recognition within the Japanese system of grey-zone situations. Because of this lack of legal recognition, Japanese officials and scholars refer to 'grey zone-like' activities (*Gurēzōn'na jitai*) rather than 'grey-zone' activities (*Gurēzōn jitai*).[429] The Defense White Paper occasionally uses the phrase 'so-called grey-zone situation' to indicate the ambiguous status of grey-zone activities within Japanese law.[430]

Tokyo instead relies on a law enforcement approach to address these grey-zone tactics. In practical terms this means that the JSDF can use weapons, but only within the framework of police powers, which imposes stricter limitations on their actions. Experts such as Retired Admiral Tomohisa Takei[431] point out that this approach complicates Japan's ability to respond to hostile actions that don't constitute an armed attack but still undermine Japan's security.[432] While most countries face this problem, Furuya points out that it is difficult for Japan to quickly shift from civilian to military-led responses due to the need for the government to obtain support from the Diet and the public, which are sensitive to the use of military force in these situations.[433]

To adapt, Japan has enacted laws to address these threats, including:

- **Maritime security operations:** allows the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) to confront hostile ships in Japanese waters under the Coast Guard Law when a situation overwhelms the capabilities of the Japan Coast Guard (JCG). This law-enforcement authority allows the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force to use weapons against civilian ships, foreign warships and submarines operating illegally in Japanese waters.[434]
- **Destruction measures against ballistic missiles:** authorises the JSDF to use missile defence systems to destroy incoming ballistic missiles and other potentially harmful objects, even if their purpose is unclear. This is also framed as a law enforcement measure rather than a military response. Under this authority, the JSDF has been on constant alert since the North Korean missile crisis in 2016.[435]
- **Law concerning situations that influence Japan's peace and security:** gives a legal basis for Japan to provide logistical support and other non-combat assistance to allies facing threats, even if those threats don't directly involve Japan.[436]

Conclusion: Australia's need for understanding Japan's crisis management

Japan's security crisis response framework, while comprehensive and evolving, faces challenges. The increasing frequency and intensity of Chinese and Russian military operations in the areas surrounding Japan test the boundaries of existing response mechanisms and highlight potential vulnerabilities. While the system benefits from a multi-layered structure with clearly defined procedures for escalating responses, its effectiveness will likely hinge on the decisive leadership of the prime minister and — in a minority government — their ability to achieve consensus among major political parties and maintain public confidence.[437]

Further, the inherent complexity of the system, with its distinct frameworks for disaster management and civil protection, risks creating confusion and delays in a complex, hybrid crisis scenario. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed some of these weaknesses, and future security crises will likely present even more complex, multifaceted challenges. Additionally, the constitutional constraints imposed by Article 9, coupled with the 'three principles', necessitate a careful balancing act between robust defence and adhering to Japan's laws and norms.

For Australia, understanding the intricacies of their indispensable partner's crisis response framework is paramount. Given the deepening security partnership and commitment to mutual consultation in times of crisis, Australia needs a clear grasp of Japan's decision-making processes and legal constraints. Equally important is to recognise Japan's agency and strong determination to respond to the challenging regional security environment in an increasingly proactive way.

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Endnotes

1. This policy report is the result of research conducted for a field trip to Tokyo for the Japan-Australia Dialogue and Exchange (JADE) program jointly funded by the United States Studies Centre (USSC) and the Japan Foundation (JF). The JADE program aims to cultivate the next generation of scholars and policy professionals focused on the Japan-Australia relationship. The author would like to extend his sincere thanks to Dr Michael J. Green, Prof. Peter J. Dean, Tom Corben, Shizuka Takada and all the staff at the Japan Foundation who helped fund and produce this report.
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313. The contents of this paper are based on the personal views of the author and are not the official views of the organisation to which the author belongs.
314. During my diplomatic service as Japanese vice-consul in Melbourne from 2020 to 2022, I witnessed a pivotal moment in Australia-China relations. The Liberal-National coalition, led by Prime Minister Scott Morrison, faced unprecedented challenges in managing bilateral relations with China. The Morrison administration adopted a pragmatic and firm stance, responding to the escalating geopolitical tensions in the Indo-Pacific region. At the time, diplomats in Japan and worldwide closely monitored the

trajectory of Australia-China relations, recognising their significance in the broader regional context. In late July and early August 2024, I participated in the Japan-Australia Dialogue and Exchange for the Next Generation program, organised by the Japan Foundation and the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney. Over two weeks, I visited Canberra, Sydney, and Perth, engaging with various stakeholders, including government officials, think tank experts and academics. These discussions revealed that Australia's approach toward China was evolving, reflecting a shift in responses to China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region.

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