

BLACK SWAN

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ON ITS OWN TWO FEET: ADVANCING THE AUSTRALIA-JAPAN DEFENCE AGENDA

Authored by Tom Corben



DEFENCE AND SECURITY THROUGH AN INDO-PACIFIC LENS



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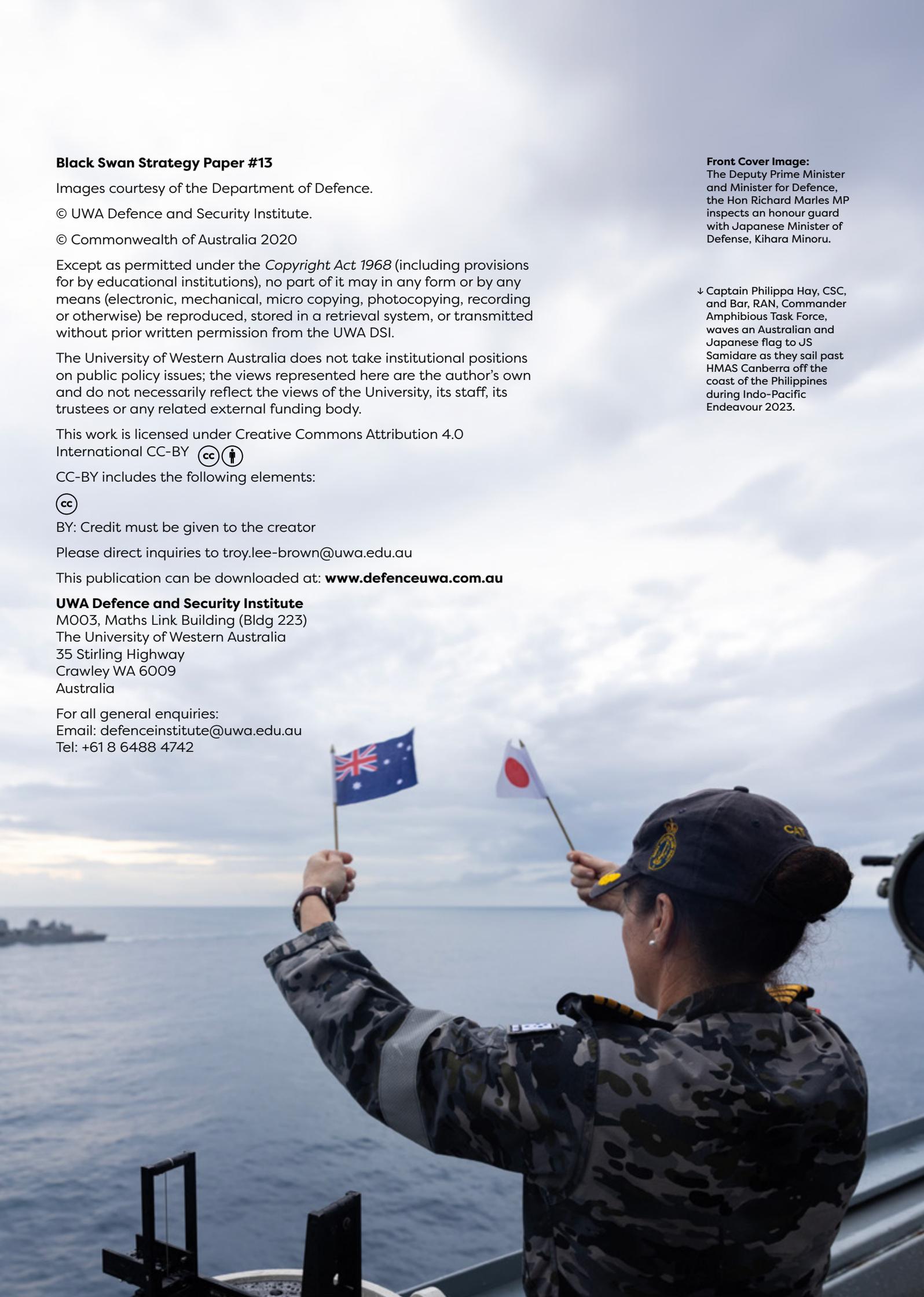
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Front Cover Image:

The Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence, the Hon Richard Marles MP inspects an honour guard with Japanese Minister of Defense, Kihara Minoru.

↓ Captain Philippa Hay, CSC, and Bar, RAN, Commander Amphibious Task Force, waves an Australian and Japanese flag to JS Samidare as they sail past HMAS Canberra off the coast of the Philippines during Indo-Pacific Endeavour 2023.



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About the Black Swan Strategy Papers

The *Black Swan Strategy Papers* are the flagship publication of the UWA Defence and Security Institute (DSI). They represent the intersection between Western Australia and strategic studies – both of which are famous for their black swans. The series aims to provide high-quality analysis and strategic insights into the Indo-Pacific region through a defence and security lens, with the hope of reducing the number of 'black swan' events with which Australian strategy and Indo-Pacific security has to contend. Each of the Black Swan Strategy Papers are generally between 5,000 and 15,000 words and are written for a policy-oriented audience. The Black Swan Strategy Papers are commission works by the UWA DSI by invitation only.



↑ Then-Prime Minister of Japan, Kishida Fumio met with Australian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence, the Hon. Richard Marles MP and Foreign Affairs Minister Penny Wong in Tokyo on 9 December 2022.

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↑ The Japan Self-Defense Force prepare to launch the Type 03 Chu-SAM medium range anti-air missile system during Exercise Talisman Sabre 2023 at Shoalwater Bay Training Area, Queensland.

Executive summary

In recent years, Australia and Japan have come to regard one another as essential defence partners, second only to the United States. Although they have been special strategic partners since 2014, the two countries have become increasingly aligned in their assessments of the deteriorating regional strategic order and how best to respond to those developments. This growing consensus is characterised by the adoption of deterrence as the primary mission for their respective defence forces; a shared emphasis on the importance of individual agency in shaping the regional order; the value of collective responses to regional defence challenges; and the importance of supporting and shaping American strategy through enhanced trilateral defence cooperation.

On that basis, the two countries have sought to inject a new purpose and urgency into their practical defence cooperation. These efforts have been aided greatly by the signing of the 2022 Australia-Japan Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA), which completed the legal and regulatory foundations for practical defence cooperation; and the issuing of the 2022 Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation, representing a major overhaul of the relationship's guiding strategic

document. These agreements have created opportunities for Australia and Japan to develop greater operational expression of their alignment through upgraded exercise engagements and new defence industrial and technology initiatives. They have also sought to harness this momentum in trilateral defence cooperation with the United States, to the extent that progress in that configuration risks outpacing bilateral developments between Australia and Japan.

In that respect, sustaining the positive trajectory of bilateral defence cooperation will require grappling with several overarching challenges. These include synchronising multiple bilateral agendas in the service of trilateral cooperation with the United States; ensuring that the Australia-Japan bilateral relationship retains its own distinct agenda from that of the trilateral partnership; and setting realistic expectations for the scope and speed at which further advancements can be made in the bilateral relationship. Yet managed appropriately, these challenges should not preclude further opportunities to enhance the Australia-Japan defence partnership through novel, practical cooperation.

Policy recommendations

- Australia and Japan should pursue greater maritime domain awareness cooperation through reciprocal deployments and combined surveillance operations around key chokepoints in littoral Southeast Asia.
- The two countries should stand up a dedicated bilateral rotational force arrangement for Japanese amphibious forces in Australia's north, drawing lessons from US Marine Rotational Force-Darwin and the Australia-Singapore Military Training Initiative.
- To support these operational initiatives, policymakers should accelerate discussions on facilitating greater Japanese access to Australian missile testing ranges and other training facilities.
- The two countries should explore opportunities for incorporating Japanese companies into Australia's Guided Weapons and Explosive Ordinance enterprise, including options for co-producing, maintaining and sustaining Japanese missiles in Australia.

Introduction

It is no exaggeration to say that Australia and Japan have become one another's most important defence partners in the Indo-Pacific after the United States.

Though special strategic partners since 2014, today the Australia-Japan bilateral partnership is infused with a 'renewed purpose': to realise the full potential of the defence relationship based on the two countries' deep strategic alignment.¹ This is driven by the convergence of their strategic outlooks regarding the deteriorating balance of power in the Indo-Pacific, and the threats that this poses to their shared strategic interests in the short term, mid-term and longer term. It is also reflective of the new consensus in Canberra and Tokyo alike regarding the importance of both countries bolstering their own deterrence capabilities, assuming more active regional defence roles, and effectively cooperating with one another and the United States.

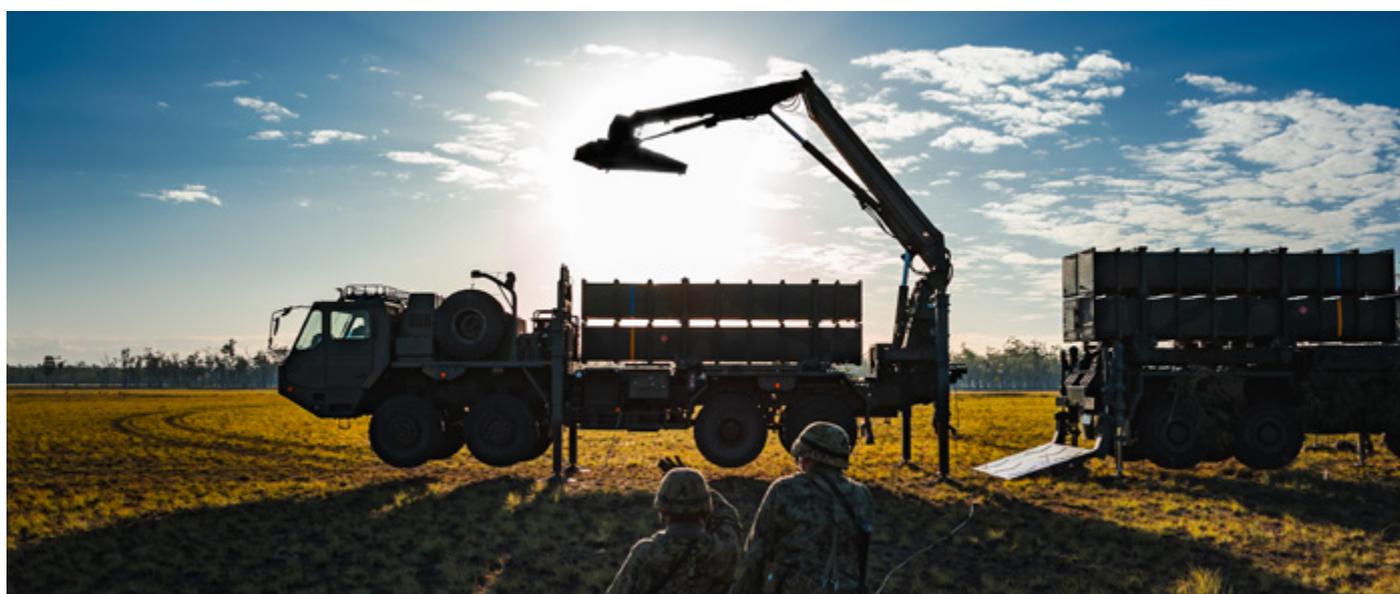
Crucially, Australia and Japan are actively working to operationalise their alignment. Recent years have witnessed a considerable expansion of the bilateral defence agenda through new or upgraded enabling agreements and dialogue mechanisms, greater numbers of military operations and exercises, and the exploration avenues for

defence industrial and technology collaboration. These efforts have accelerated markedly since the issuing of the updated 2022 Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation (JDSC) and the conclusion of the 2022 RAA. Notably, these developments have been equally essential for operationalising the Australia-Japan-United States Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD), a grouping regarded by policymakers in all three countries as the new core of a collective regional defence strategy.

Even so, Australia and Japan continue to grapple with several important considerations. Notwithstanding recent successes, there remain questions as to whether bilateral defence cooperation can keep pace with rapidly evolving operational requirements, particularly those at the trilateral level with the United States. There are also questions regarding the extent to which Canberra and Tokyo envisage pursuing real-world defence cooperation without Washington, and whether or not the bilateral defence partnership is fit for that purpose. Answering these questions will be essential to ensuring that,

in operational terms, the Australia-Japan defence partnership lives up to the countries' evident ambitions for its future.

This report first examines the key logics animating the Australia-Japan defence agenda; namely, the consensus on the centrality of deterrence, agency and collective action to both countries' defence strategies, and the importance of supporting an enduring US regional military role in the Indo-Pacific. It then explores the significance of the conclusion of the RAA and the issuing of the 2022 JDSC, examining how these developments are driving the implementation of the Australia-Japan defence agenda at the bilateral and trilateral level alike. The report then addresses several broad challenges arising from these implementation efforts, including those associated with: coordinating and harmonising multiple alliance agendas in the context of the TSD; right-sizing the bilateral partnership's scope and objectives independent of the United States; and setting realistic expectations for its future development. Finally, the report concludes by exploring a range of options for giving greater operational expression to the Australia-Japan defence agenda.



¹ Members of the Japan Self-Defense Force from the 2nd Anti-Aircraft Artillery Brigade prepare to launch the Type O3 Chu-SAM medium range anti-air missile system during Exercise Talisman Sabre 2023 at Shoalwater Bay Training Area, Queensland.

CHAPTER 1

The logic for expanding defence cooperation

The Australia-Japan convergence on defence policy is driven fundamentally by the two countries' increasingly aligned outlooks on the changing strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific.

In short, both countries perceive a new and growing need to respond to major shifts in the regional strategic balance through: bolstering their respective defence capabilities; elevating defence cooperation to complement robust diplomatic and economic engagement; and supporting a credible and enduring US military presence in the region, including through operationalising a trilateral defence agenda.

Deterrence, agency and collective action

Deterrence has rarely figured as the leading edge of either Australian or Japanese regional strategy. Yet in the face of a rapidly deteriorating regional strategic balance, both countries have embarked on a range of efforts to strengthen their independent and collective deterrence capabilities. In explaining the elevation of defence capabilities and partnerships in Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision, then-Prime Minister Kishida

Fumio observed at the 2022 Shangri La Dialogue that "Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow... As a means of preventing such situations and protecting ourselves, we need to enhance our deterrence and response capabilities."² He committed to "fundamentally reinforce Japan's defence capabilities within the next five years" to support "realism diplomacy for a new era."³ Japan's progress since then has been remarkable. Since the release of the three national security documents in 2022, Japan has markedly increased its defence spending (aiming for 1.6 to 2.0 per cent of GDP by 2027 based on 2022 levels⁴), progressed the acquisition of counter-strike weapons and targeting systems⁵, sought to revitalise Japan's defence industry⁶, and bolstered cyber-defensive and cyber-offensive toolkits.⁷

Canberra's outlook on regional dynamics and the changing role for defence capabilities relative to other tools of statecraft is broadly

similar. Australia's 2024 National Defence Strategy clearly states that 'deterrence is now Australia's primary strategic defence objective'⁸, situating the country's defence investments and partnerships relative to a growing 'risk of military escalation or miscalculation that could lead to a major conflict in the region.'⁹ Targeted increases in defence capabilities figure as essential ingredients for achieving 'a sustainable strategic balance'¹⁰, particularly when aggregated with the capabilities of major partners like Japan and the United States. Importantly, successive strategy documents have identified the need to reorient Australia's force structure to focus on capabilities and tasks required to support a strategy of deterrence by denial.¹¹ This shift is intended to address the 'most significant strategic risks' in the country's immediate regions of interest – hostile operations in the Pacific Islands, littoral Southeast Asia, and the Eastern Indian Ocean – through acquiring long-range precision capabilities; nuclear-powered submarines; a larger surface fleet; and long-range intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) assets.¹²



↑ Japan Self-Defense Force amphibious assault vehicles drive down King's Beach, near Bowen, Queensland, during Exercise Talisman Sabre 2019.

To maximise the effects of their independent defence investments, Australia and Japan have placed a heightened premium on productive strategic partnerships, particularly with each other. Unsurprisingly, the two countries have elevated the overall importance of defence in their special strategic partnership to a level commensurate with their long-standing economic and diplomatic collaboration.¹³ This is built on a mutual recognition of the deteriorating regional strategic environment and growing necessity of collective responses to defence and security challenges.¹⁴ Relatedly, both countries recognise the importance of their own agency – and that of each other – in preserving a favourable regional order. Leading Australian diplomats and analysts alike have recognised Japan’s “ambitious and active use of power, networks, and influence” to achieve its regional aims, and maintain that Australia should seek to do the same with equal “ambition and activism”.¹⁵ Meanwhile, Japan’s 2022 National Defense Strategy (NDS) states that while ‘others also expect Japan to play a role commensurate with its national strength’, Tokyo also expects the same of those partners – particularly Australia.¹⁶

This renewed premium on agency, deterrence and collective action is appropriately captured in the 2022 JDSC. Marking the first major update to the cornerstone policy framework for bilateral defence cooperation in fifteen years, the 2022 JDSC enshrines collective deterrence and the preservation of ‘a favourable strategic balance’ as core objectives for Australia-Japan cooperation.¹⁷ This marks a distinct departure from the preoccupation of the 2007 JDSC with second-order, albeit important, security challenges including proliferation risks related to North Korea, regional non-traditional security challenges, peace-keeping operations, border security and law enforcement.¹⁸ This transformation is aptly captured in the words of Japan’s former Ambassador to Australia, Yamagami Shingo, who observed that the elevation of defence in the overall bilateral relationship “is a testament to a transformation in mindset” in both countries.¹⁹

Complementing, not eclipsing, economics

Australia and Japan regard this new premium on military deterrence as an essential complement, rather than replacement, for non-military tools of statecraft. Senior Japanese government figures have repeatedly stressed that defence remains one of several equally important tools of statecraft. For instance, in 2022, then-Minister of Foreign Affairs Hayashi Yoshimasa listed ‘restoring [the] strategic balance’ in the Indo-Pacific both as Japan’s foremost regional challenge and as the essential precondition for the effective exercise of Japanese diplomacy and economic power.²⁰ Indeed, Japan’s defence policy revolution is best situated within a broader effort to ‘mobilise its comprehensive national power’ behind a holistic grand strategy²¹, in the interests of protecting and promoting mutual economic prosperity across the region.

This approach by Tokyo has resonated in Canberra. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence Richard Marles noted in December 2022 that “[l]ike Japan, Australia does not place a premium on military power as a tool of strategy. Australia will place its primary focus on diplomacy, economic openness and upholding rules.”²² Likewise, Minister for Foreign Affairs Penny Wong has framed defence and diplomatic tools as “essential and interdependent parts” of Australia’s regional strategy²³, underwriting regional prosperity through achieving a favourable balance of power.²⁴ As such, while both countries see an elevated role for military power in their respective regional strategies, their mutual preferences for exercising diplomatic and economic power wherever possible remain largely unchanged. Indeed, it is for this reason that Australia and Japan have engaged in annual ministerial-level Economic Dialogues since 2018 “to complement high-level defence and security cooperation.”²⁵

Supporting – and shaping – US Indo-Pacific Strategy

Australia and Japan also agree that a credible and enduring United States military presence in the Indo-Pacific is essential to achieving their shared strategic objectives. This remains the case even as both countries recognise that American military power is in relative decline vis-à-vis China. To that end, both countries have sought to modernise their respective alliances with the United States not only to shore-up America’s regional military position, but to amplify their own influence and agency in shaping these alliance agendas and US regional strategy more broadly.²⁶ In short, ‘integration’ has become the key ‘doing word’ for Australia and Japan with respect to the United States.

Japan’s independent efforts to bolster its defence capabilities are driving major changes in the US-Japan alliance. Tokyo and Washington are exploring new command and control arrangements to support cooperation in peacetime and during contingencies²⁷, pursuing broader defence industrial and technology cooperation to meet mutual capability requirements, and exploring new forms of operational cooperation, including the creation of the ‘the first real time information sharing capability’ between US and Japanese forces.²⁸ Leading US-Japan alliance experts have touted these developments as marking a ‘shift from coordination to integration’, one which will likely require reimagining the division of defence roles, missions and capabilities between the two countries to account for Japan’s growing military power.²⁹

Canberra has also regarded upgrades to US-Australia defence cooperation as essential for achieving its regional strategic objectives. This has included more regular and sophisticated maintenance on high-end military assets currently or soon to be operated by both countries, including nuclear-powered submarines³⁰; the co-production of US-origin precision guided munitions in Australia through the Guided Weapons and Explosive Ordnance (GWEO) Enterprise, now effectively an alliance initiative³¹; and reforms to defence trade controls between

Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States to facilitate greater defence industrial integration between Canberra and Washington.³² The two countries have also deepened force posture cooperation to facilitate more frequent joint operations in Australia's near-region. This has included upgrades to major air and naval facilities and the creation of new access locations in Australia's continental north and island territories.³³ Senior Australian Defence figures have framed these developments as indicative of the transformation of the alliance from a more hierarchical relationship towards "more of a strategic partnership than we've ever had before."³⁴

Second to one: the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue

Both countries' support for an enduring US regional presence goes beyond modernising their respective bilateral alliances. Rather, Canberra and Tokyo concur on the need to better network these alliances and their own special strategic partnership through the development of the TSD, a view shared in Washington. Indeed, policymakers in all three countries regard the TSD as the core of a shared collective regional deterrence strategy, with an attendant need to ensure that its agenda and infrastructure are fit for that purpose.³⁵

It is no coincidence, then, that the TSD is frequently singled out as a primary mechanism for operationalising the deep strategic alignment between Australia and Japan. In most high-level joint statements since 2020, Canberra and Tokyo have framed their enhanced bilateral defence relationship as mutually reinforcing their respective alliances with Washington and for their trilateral cooperation.³⁶ Senior Defence figures have clearly identified the trilateralisation of US-Australia and US-Japan military activities as "a broader theme" animating the Australia-Japan defence agenda.³⁷ In turn, Canberra and Tokyo regard trilateral cooperation with Washington as essential for deepening their own 'strategic alignment, policy coordination, interoperability and joint capability'.³⁸

Importantly, however, the Australia-Japan convergence is as much

about managing the United States as it is about supporting it.³⁹ For Canberra, Tokyo has long figured as 'an indispensable partner' both in counselling Washington in its approach to regional strategy and in collaborating on regional order-building initiatives without US input, particularly when it comes to regional trade and economic integration.⁴⁰ As such, even as they work to support an enduring US regional presence and to craft "an open regional order that has China prominent but not dominant"⁴¹, both Canberra and Tokyo maintain a deep interest in working together to shape US regional strategy in ways that better support their own interests.⁴² In that context, commitments in the updated 2022 JDSC to 'strengthen exchanges of strategic assessments at all levels' are about co-managing regional great power dynamics more broadly, not simply those emanating from China.⁴³

Increased bilateral cooperation and enduring support for the United States is not necessarily about preserving a bygone regional order. Rather, Australia and Japan have long agreed on the need to shape the regional order through working with change rather than against it. In that respect, both countries are seeking to shape prevailing strategic trends in pursuit of what Japanese strategic documents have termed a 'new balance' and what Australian leaders have described as a "strategic equilibrium", characterised by greater multipolarity rather than unipolarity or bipolarity.⁴⁴ Indeed, it is precisely this need to respond to shifting regional strategic dynamics that is leading the two countries to pursue new proactive forms of cooperation, including on defence issues.⁴⁵



↑ Ground Combat Element personnel from the Japan Self-Defense Force conduct wet and dry environmental rehearsal training onboard Royal Australian Navy ship HMAS Canberra, during Exercise Talisman Sabre 2021.



↑ Three RAAF F-35A Lightning II aircraft transit to Japan for Exercise Bushido Guardian 2023.

CHAPTER 2

Walking the talk: the step-change in Australia-Japan defence cooperation

Encouragingly, Australia and Japan have gone beyond simply talking up the importance of bilateral security cooperation. Building on a foundation of official-level dialogues and enabling agreements, they have increasingly sought to operationalise new forms of practical defence cooperation. Since the ‘in principle’ conclusion of the long-negotiated RAA in late 2020, Canberra and Tokyo have rapidly built out an ambitious defence cooperation agenda across a wider variety of domains at both the bilateral and trilateral level. That intent has been enshrined in the 2022 JDSC and reflected in successive defence and foreign ministers’ ‘2+2’ joint statements. Though not necessarily comparable documents, the RAA and JDSC are nevertheless regarded as key enablers for the Australia-Japan strategic partnership – in the words of Richard Marles, critical mechanisms for ensuring that “our defence and security cooperation is commensurate with our strategic alignment.”⁴⁶ Overall,

the step-change in Australia-Japan defence cooperation since 2020 can be characterised by several major themes: shifting from laying the relationship’s foundations to actioning greater practical collaboration; deepening strategic coordination and consultation; moving beyond joint exercises to real-world operations; and enhancing defence industrial and technological collaboration.

Completing the foundations: the Reciprocal Access Agreement

Essential to the evolution of the Australia-Japan defence relationship has been the belated finalisation of the RAA, signed in November 2022. Though misinterpreted by some as representative of a new alliance between the two countries, the RAA does not commit the two countries to one another’s defence.⁴⁷ Rather, it set the conditions for more frequent and extended visits by Australian and Japanese military forces and

civilian components to one another’s defence facilities⁴⁸, “streamlining procedures for facilitating deployment and joint activities including for entry and departure of visiting forces, customs duties and taxes, and criminal jurisdiction.”⁴⁹ Indeed, that the RAA negotiation process was so drawn-out was due in large part to disagreements over the application of local laws to visiting forces – specifically, of Japan’s capital punishment laws to Australian soldiers deployed to Japan, an issue that was ultimately never fully resolved in the final text.⁵⁰

The RAA is significant for several reasons. In practical terms, it will help to facilitate the deployment of Australian and Japanese air, ground and naval assets to one another’s defence facilities for longer periods, creating new opportunities for extended exercise engagements and military operations in a manner impossible before the agreement’s entry into force. This was exemplified



↑ A Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) KC-30A MRTT refuels a Japan Air Self Defense Force (JASDF) F-15J Eagle whilst flying in formation with RAAF No. 75 Squadron F-35A Lightning II aircraft, JASDF F-35A Lightning II's and JASDF F-15J Eagles during Exercise Bushido Guardian 2023.

in mid-2023, with the reciprocal deployment of Australian and Japanese F-35 joint-strike fighter aircraft to one another's bases under the authorities of the RAA.⁵¹ Notwithstanding the near-decade between the commencement of negotiations in 2014 and the agreement's entry into force in late 2023, the RAA also reflects the 'dramatic evolution' of the special strategic partnership to more fully embrace meaningful defence cooperation.⁵² Beyond its operational ramifications, it is also considered 'an epoch-making template for Japan's 21st century security relationships', given that it is Tokyo's first such agreement with any partner other than Washington.⁵³ Indeed, the RAA has become the template for similar agreements with Japan's other important strategic partnerships, including the United Kingdom, the Philippines and France.⁵⁴ In that respect, when taken with both countries' emphasis on collective action in their regional defence strategies, the RAA constitutes a critical building block for building out a more sophisticated defence agenda at the trilateral and potentially quadrilateral level, with partners like the United States and India.⁵⁵

The RAA constituted the last in a series of cross-bracing foundational defence agreements between the two countries, required to facilitate more practical defence cooperation.⁵⁶ It also effectively elevated the baseline for Australia-Japan defence cooperation to a level comparable with the cross-bracing frameworks underpinning the US-Japan and US-Australia alliances.⁵⁷ In that respect, formalising the legal arrangements necessary to enable more regular and longer visits by Australian and Japanese forces to one another's facilities will have pay-offs beyond the bilateral partnership, enabling the sorts of combined or coordinated operations that a collective Australia-Japan-United States deterrence strategy should be building towards.

While the RAA has effectively raised the ceiling for Australia-Japan defence cooperation, the limits for such collaboration have yet to be tested.⁵⁸ Indeed, some analysts believe that the defence relationship has 'yet to find its top gear' despite considerable progress in operationalising the 2022 JDSC.⁵⁹ Properly executed, this ought to go beyond simply testing the boundaries of the agreement itself. Considered in the broader context of the paradigm

shift in Australia-Japan defence relations, and the severity of the regional strategic environment, the measure of the success of the RAA should be in the extent to which it facilitates forms of bilateral and trilateral defence cooperation that 'test comfort levels and appetite for risk to a sharper degree than before'.⁶⁰

Setting the Agenda: the 2022 Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation

The ambitious direction set by the 2022 JDSC should build on the foundations completed by the RAA and test the boundaries for Australia-Japan defence cooperation. The first major overhaul of the bilateral security agenda since the original Joint Declaration of March 2007⁶¹, the 2022 JDSC reflected the elevation of the importance of defence cooperation in the relationship going forward. Though short on specific details, the updated JDSC set out the contours for operationalising practical defence cooperation between Australia and Japan, and with mutual third parties like the United States over the next decade. Indeed, Deputy Prime Minister Marles framed the document as "a compass" for guiding efforts "to refine the scope and objectives" of the bilateral defence relationship.⁶²

The 2022 JDSC captured several notable shifts in the bilateral security relationship. Most prominently, it enshrined collective deterrence and the preservation of “a favourable strategic balance” as key guiding principles for Australia-Japan defence cooperation.⁶⁵ This reflected a mutual recognition in both capitals of the centrality of deterrence and collective action to one another’s regional defence strategies, and their shared assessment of the deteriorating security environment across the Indo-Pacific. In that sense, it also marked a distinct departure from the 2007 JDSC’s focus on second-order, albeit important on non-traditional security challenges.⁶⁴

To support this conceptual shift, the 2022 JDSC committed both countries to cementing their alignment through deepening their political and military engagement on strategic issues in two key ways. Firstly, Australia and Japan would develop the means and the mechanisms to more frequently share their respective assessments of prevailing regional strategic trends. This went beyond the directive contained in the original 2007 JDSC to ‘strengthen exchanges of strategic assessments at all levels’⁶⁵ to include a commitment to ‘consult each other on contingencies that may affect our sovereignty and regional security interests, and consider measures in response’.⁶⁶ It would see Australia and Japan discuss their respective and/or combined responses to prospective regional conflicts, both ahead of time and, potentially, at the onset of a crisis. Such coordination would be supported by frequent high-level official dialogues and more extensive intelligence cooperation and classified information sharing, facilitated by recent updates to the 2013 Information Security Agreement.⁶⁷ Though short of a formal alliance commitment, the wording of the JDSC drew several comparisons with the language contained within the Australia-United States ANZUS Treaty⁶⁸; specifically, the commitment to ‘consult together whenever in the opinion of any of them the territorial integrity, political independence or security of any of the Parties is threatened in the Pacific’.⁶⁹

Secondly, the 2022 JDSC outlined plans for greater coordination and integration between the two countries’ defence forces, including

discussions over the “scope, objectives and forms” of bilateral military cooperation.⁷⁰ As noted by Australian Ambassador Justin Hayhurst, these developments mark a significant push to more purposefully align national “systems and policies” and to capitalise on pre-existing levels of military interoperability to generate greater deterrent effects, both in the interests of achieving common strategic objectives.⁷¹ These strategic and operational consultations are intended to be mutually reinforcing. Functioning as intended, joint assessments of regional strategic trends, including known or potential flashpoints, should directly inform bilateral assessments of the operational requirements for responding to regional deterrence challenges. In turn, closer operational collaboration will help to reinforce the two countries’ overall strategic alignment.

Finally, the 2022 JDSC reaffirmed that both countries consider their respective alliances with the United States to be central to the development of their own defence relationship, not just their own security. Specifically, the document presented trilateral defence cooperation as a vector for reinforcing Australia and Japan’s ‘strategic alignment, policy coordination, interoperability and joint capability’, while it also framed a stronger Australia-Japan defence relationship as essential to reinforcing each country’s ‘respective alliances with the United States’.⁷² This is based on the aforementioned consensus between Canberra and Tokyo that Washington continues to figure as the indispensable balancing power in Asia, notwithstanding changes in its relative regional military power vis-à-vis Beijing.⁷³



↑ Japan Maritime Self Defense Force Petty Officer Second Class Noma Hidekazu takes photographs from a P-1 Maritime Patrol aircraft during an Exercise Pacific Protector sortie over the Eastern Australia Exercise Area.

CHAPTER 3

Progress on implementation

Encouragingly, Australia and Japan have sought to put the commitments contained in the 2022 JDSC into action, moving ‘quickly to convert the relationship’s baseline potential into tangible gains’.⁷⁴ The two countries have made notable progress on realising new or expanded forms of practical defence cooperation, including ‘more sophisticated joint exercises and operations, multilateral exercises with partners, mutual use of facilities including maintenance, asset protection, and personnel links and exchanges’.⁷⁵ These efforts to operationalise the JDSC mark a step-change in the bilateral defence partnership. As Ambassador Hayhurst put it, the JDSC has propelled the two countries to move beyond “a focus on dialogue and exchange to strategic coordination and delivering deeper operational, industrial and technological cooperation.”⁷⁶

Importantly, such cooperation addresses both the ‘inputs’ and the ‘outputs’ required for a collective defence strategy. That is, the JDSC puts notable emphasis not only on effective exercises and operations (outputs), but also on critical warfighting enablers like information sharing, logistics collaboration and sustainment, and defence industrial and technology cooperation (inputs).⁷⁷

Bilateral exercises

In recent years, Australia and Japan have sought to enhance the quality and sophistication of long-standing air and naval exercises. Through the biennial Nichi Gou Trident naval exercises, the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) and Japan Maritime Self-Defense Forces (J-MSDF) have pursued increasingly sophisticated high-end maritime defence activities. These have had a distinct focus on

enhancing collective anti-submarine warfare (ASW) cooperation, anti-surface warfare drills, maritime domain awareness (MDA) and intelligence, reconnaissance and surveillance (ISR) capabilities. These engagements have seen Japanese forces conduct several asset protection missions for Australian naval vessels since 2021, a mission previously conducted solely in support of US forces, made possible by the legal authorities to participate in collective self-defence activities under Japan’s 2015 Legislation for Peace and Security.⁷⁸ Australia and Japan also have plans to deepen their combined submarine operations, and will explore options for conducting ‘submarine search and rescue training’ together in future, a step beyond Japan’s present observer status at Australia’s Exercise Black Carillon.⁷⁹

The Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) and Japan Air Self-Defense Forces (J-ASDF) have steadily deepened their cooperation. This is particularly noteworthy given that the services only established a dedicated bilateral air combat exercise, Bushido Guardian, in 2019, with only one edition staged to date.⁸⁰ Despite their relative infancy, these drills have evolved quickly to focus on the employment of both forces’ most advanced combat aircraft and essential fleet logistics enablers. For example, the two sides have steadily implemented a June 2021 air-to-air refuelling agreement to service an increasingly wide-range of frontline fighter aircraft, including through stand-alone bilateral engagements and at successive iterations of Australia’s multinational air force exercise, Pitch Black.⁸¹ As a result, RAAF tankers are now capable of refuelling JASDF multirole F-2s, maritime strike F-15s, and – anecdotally – F-35A joint stealth fighters⁸², though it is unclear from public reporting whether Japanese forces are able to reciprocate.



↑ A Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force Kawasaki P-1 aircraft arrives at RAAF Base Darwin in preparation for Exercise Kakadu 2024.

Reciprocal visits of fifth generation fighter aircraft have been emblematic of the shift in bilateral defence cooperation towards high-end deterrence challenges. In September 2023, a pair of Japanese F-35As visited Australia in the days immediately after the RAA entered into force, marking the first overseas deployment of the JASDF's most advanced combat aircraft.⁸³ To reciprocate, Australia deployed half a dozen of its own F-35s to Japan for Exercise Bushido Guardian 2023 for combined operations with JASDF fourth- and fifth- generation fighters, including 'large-force employment missions' and integration across all levels of cooperation.⁸⁴ Fifth-generation aircraft deployments look likely to serve as the primary vector for advancing bilateral defence cooperation in the near future. Noting 'the importance of air interoperability to deterrence', the 2024 '2+2' Defence and Foreign Ministers' Joint Statement flagged further 'reciprocal asset deployments' in the near future, including the prospect of further Japanese F-35 rotational dispatches to Australian airbases.⁸⁵ These deployments would be enabled by the RAA and well supported by the F-35 maintenance centre in New South Wales.⁸⁶

Defence science and technology

Australia and Japan have also sought to expand their defence industrial and technology collaboration, framed by senior officials as an essential complement to military exercises and operations.⁸⁷ Once again, the trajectory of these engagements is consistent with the partnership's overall reorientation towards high-end deterrence, though it has yet to produce notable tangible outputs. In 2021, Australia's Defence Science and Technology Group (DSTG) and Japan's Acquisition, Technology and Logistics Agency (ATLA) launched two four-year joint research projects on autonomous vehicles and marine hydrodynamics, supporting the development of technologies to enable unmanned systems operations in difficult terrain and GPS-denied environments.⁸⁸ These projects built on previous joint basic research projects conducted between 2015 and 2019, launched in the immediate wake of changes to Japan's Three Principles on Transfer of

In practical terms, the two countries have identified 'long-range guided weapons, Integrated Air and Missile Defence (IAMD) and Under Sea Warfare (USW)' as well as 'autonomous systems across all domains' as key focus areas.

Defence Equipment and Technology and the signing of the Australia-Japan Agreement concerning the Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology in 2014.⁸⁹

Since the issuing of the 2022 JDSC, Australia and Japan have signalled their intent to refocus their efforts on the 'co-development and production of advanced defence capabilities'.⁹⁰ In practical terms, the two countries have identified 'long-range guided weapons, Integrated Air and Missile Defence (IAMD) and Under Sea Warfare (USW)' as well as 'autonomous systems across all domains' as key focus areas.⁹¹ To that end, the two countries have also concluded new bilateral enabling agreements, most notably the June 2023 Research, Development, Test and Evaluation (RDT&E) Arrangement between ATLA and DSTG to facilitate joint RDT&E at a faster pace.⁹² The first collaboration under this new arrangement was announced in January 2024, a project on undersea autonomous warfare focused on developing secure acoustic underwater communication technologies.⁹³ This project has been framed by senior Australian Defence officials as both intended to foster a foundation for future research on collaborative autonomy, and to 'deliver advanced capabilities to support asymmetric advantage'⁹⁴, wording not dissimilar to that used to describe AUKUS Pillar II projects.

Defence industry

Australia and Japan are also exploring options for greater cooperation on defence supply chains and capability procurement. Foremost among them is Japan's bid to replace Australia's current fleet of six multi-purpose frigates with 11 new vessels for advanced air defence, long-range strike, presence and undersea warfare missions.⁹⁵ As one of five competing

bidders, Japan's special strategic partnership with Australia could both further enable and benefit from a successful bid.⁹⁶ Notwithstanding Japan's relative inexperience in exporting major defence equipment abroad and the disappointment of its failed bid to build Australia's next fleet of conventional submarines in 2016⁹⁷, the Mogami 30FFM frigate is widely considered a front-runner for the program because of its mature design and proven capabilities, both of which meet Australia's capability requirements.⁹⁸ Though the process is unresolved at the time of writing, a successful Japanese bid would facilitate greater interoperability between Australian and Japanese forces and support Japan's efforts to elevate arms exports as a commercial-military tool of statecraft. It could also facilitate further bilateral and trilateral cooperation on naval maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO) in a manner similar to emerging initiatives in the US-Japan and US-Australia contexts⁹⁹, with the additional prospect of future models including components and capabilities jointly developed by Australia and Japan.¹⁰⁰

The trilateral takes precedence

Notwithstanding developments at the bilateral level, it is arguably at the trilateral level with the United States where progress on operationalising Australia-Japan defence cooperation is most evident.

The steady trilateralisation of Australia-US and Japan-US defence activities is emblematic of that momentum. Since 2015, Japan has dispatched sizable military detachments to the US-Australia Talisman Sabre exercises, including the Ground Self-Defense Force's (GSDF) Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade (ARDB), Type-12 anti-ship missile batteries, and major surface



↑ On 4 September 2024, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence, the Hon Richard Marles MP, hosted a bilateral Defence Ministers' Meeting (DMM) with Japan's Minister of Defense, Kihara Minoru, in Geelong, Victoria.

combatants for increasingly complex combined drills and integrated operations across the full spectrum of military cooperation.¹⁰¹ Building on the interoperability fostered through Talisman Sabre, Australia recently joined the marquee US-Japan Exercises Yama Sakura 2023 and Keen Edge 2024 as a full participant for the first time, with Australian commanders expressing interest in increase the complexity of these engagements in coming years.¹⁰² Defence ministers from all three countries have flagged the trilateralisation of Exercise Bushido Guardian in 2025 through the participation of F-35s from all three countries.¹⁰³ These trends build on pre-existing trilateral air force engagements through Exercise Cope North (a bilateral US-Japan engagement until approximately 2010) focused on 'integration for large-force employment, agile combat employment', and drilling temporary trilateral command and control arrangements.¹⁰⁴

Australia and Japan have also sought to leverage their respective force posture initiatives and combined activities with the United States in the service of advancing bilateral cooperation. In July 2023, Japan was formally invited to "integrate" into US-Australia force posture initiatives¹⁰⁵. This decision will prospectively link Australia-Japan discussions for potential rotations of JMSDF amphibious forces and F-35s in future years with long-standing rotations of US amphibious units and aircraft 'of all

types' through Australian facilities.¹⁰⁶ Meanwhile, Australia was invited to participate in the US-Japan Bilateral Intelligence Analysis Cell (BIAC)¹⁰⁷, the first real-time bilateral information sharing capability initiative that sees US and Japanese operators 'jointly analyze and process information gathered from assets of both countries' during operations in the East China Sea.¹⁰⁸

Building on these activities, the three countries have clearly demonstrated their intent to transition from set-piece military exercises to unscripted, 'actual operations in the maritime and air domains'.¹⁰⁹ To be sure, the three countries have routinely conducted air and naval exercises in the South and East China Seas for some years in their respective bilateral partnerships, as a trilateral partnership (including trilateral asset protection missions¹¹⁰), and with other fourth parties such as India and the Philippines.¹¹¹ However, since late 2022, they have pursued a greater number of discrete trilateral maritime activities and operations focused on airborne ISR and MDA in the East China Sea and Philippine Sea. These operations focused on enhanced information sharing, mission planning and 'aircraft rider exchanges', largely conducted out of Japanese facilities.¹¹² Further afield, in 2024, major surface combatants from the three countries have also conducted 'trilateral operations' in the South China Sea and the Bay of Bengal in quick succession.¹¹³

Australia, Japan and the US have also established new, dedicated trilateral engagements and frameworks to facilitate further cooperation, including several new exercise and working group combinations. For instance, in February 2023 the three countries flagged a new theatre ASW working group and tabletop exercise series, intended to 'remove friction points between forces in order to enhance our combined information sharing, coordination, and communication'.¹¹⁴ In May 2024, the three countries conducted their first ever Combat Ammunition Production Exercise (CAPEX), which saw servicemen from all three countries simulate conditions for meeting urgent munitions assembly requirements at short notice.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, building on a new inter-navy Memorandum of Understanding on Information Warfare signed in April 2024¹¹⁶, the three countries held their first ever named maritime information warfare exercise, Blue Spectrum. Conducted in July 2024, Blue Spectrum focused on 'synchronising defensive cyber tactics, techniques, [and] procedures' in anticipation of future maritime contingencies.¹¹⁷ Looking forward, the three countries have also flagged expanded cooperation on advanced capability developments – specifically, uncrewed air and maritime systems, including through AUKUS Pillar II – as well as a series of trilateral integrated air and missile defence activities beginning in 2027.¹¹⁸

CHAPTER 4

Challenges for the bilateral agenda

Australia and Japan are making steady progress towards operationalising their new defence cooperation agenda. However, a range of challenges may complicate these efforts going forward.

While this report could focus on any number of technical or operational challenges, it instead contends that Australia and Japan will need to grapple with several overarching and inter-related challenges relating to: harmonising their respective agendas with the United States to minimise any potential ‘integration gap’ between the three partners; ensuring that the Australia-Japan defence partnership retains a distinct bilateral purpose; and setting realistic expectations regarding the scope and speed at which this agenda can progress. Thinking through these more conceptual challenges as much as solving technical or operational puzzles will be essential if the Australia-Japan defence partnership is to live up to its ambition.

Harmonising alliance agendas

Australia and Japan will need to ensure that bilateral cooperation keeps pace with rapid developments in their respective alliances with the United States. This will be essential for enabling impactful bilateral and trilateral cooperation alike. Indeed, there is already a considerable ‘integration gap’ between the US-Japan and US-Australia alliances on the one hand and the Australia-Japan strategic partnership on the other in terms of institutional and operational integration. Australia and Japan’s respective alliances with the United States will also likely continue to set the broader conditions in which their own bilateral relationship will evolve. Indeed, there are ready examples of how developments – or a lack thereof – in one bilateral can affect developments in another. For example, it was the belated finalisation of the Australia-Japan RAA which finally completed the legal foundations for operationalising their bilateral *and* trilateral defence cooperation in novel ways, despite the

long-established US-Australia and US-Japan status of forces agreements.¹¹⁹ Given that the deterrent value of the trilateral defence partnership may only be as strong as its weakest link, it will be important to ensure that bilateral defence cooperation keeps up with ambitious alliance modernisation efforts underway in both the Australia-US and Japan-US relationships.¹²⁰

The long-term success of Australia-Japan and Australia-Japan-US defence cooperation could hinge greatly on the countries’ ability to harmonise their modernisation agendas. So far, the record is mixed. Encouragingly, plans for new Command and Control (C2) arrangements between the United States and Japan, including the creation of a new permanent joint headquarters, have prompted parallel discussions in the Australia-Japan context to revisit their own C2 arrangements and refine their own integration agenda.¹²¹ On the other hand, the alignment of the AUKUS countries’ defence trade control regulations to create a limited defence free trade zone between them could complicate some forms of Australia-Japan and Australia-Japan-US cooperation, in relation to advanced strategic capabilities. These complications could arise from the creation of a two-tiered defence trade system between Australia and the US on the one hand, and Japan on the other.¹²²

Burdensome export controls are already an issue for Australia and Japan alike. Consider that Japan recently elected to work with the United Kingdom rather than the United States on its next-generation combat aircraft, in part to avoid the negative influence of US export controls on Japanese technologies.¹²³ In addition, there remain questions

over whether AUKUS-inspired reforms to Australian defence trade controls may have unintentionally emulated certain aspects of US regulations and, with them, legal disincentives for Japanese companies to work with the Australian government.¹²⁴ Though the AUKUS countries have commenced discussions with Japan regarding opportunities to collaborate on specific defence technology projects¹²⁵, analysts remain concerned that Tokyo’s participation might be hampered by these regulatory differences.¹²⁶ Such seamless collaboration may be possible in the classified government-to-government space or on a project-by-project basis. However, it will remain difficult to foster greater collaboration between the Australian and US dual-use and commercial sectors – let alone those of Japan – without further reform efforts, something considered essential to maximising the operational capabilities and technological edges of all three countries.¹²⁷

Distinguishing the bilateral from the trilateral

Australia and Japan will need to consciously build out a bilateral agenda that has practical utility in its own right, not only in support of trilateral cooperation with the United States. While these two objectives may not be mutually exclusive, some degree of distinction will be necessary in order to ensure that the Australia-Japan defence relationship is robust enough and appropriately scoped so as to stand on its own two feet. To be sure, there are good reasons why the trilateral relationship has occupied an outsized place in the recent framing of bilateral cooperation. The consensus between Canberra and Tokyo on the requirement for a collective regional defence strategy, and the identification of the Australia-Japan-United States trilateral relationship as the core of that strategy, has clearly enmeshed the bilateral relationship. This focus on the trilateral relationship may also be attributable to the fact that, at present, it is difficult for many



↑ Japan Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF) maintenance crew conducts pre-flight checks on Mitsubishi F-2 aircraft during Exercise Pitch Black 24, RAAF Base Darwin.

experts or policymakers in Australia or Japan to conceive of many plausible scenarios where the two countries would respond to high-end military threats *without* the United States.¹²⁸

Even so, Australia and Japan will need to invest sufficient time and resources in thinking through how to produce tangible combined operational effects independently of the United States. Indeed, Australia and Japan have often worked closely together to achieve shared regional strategic objectives without America's involvement, most notably with respect to the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership.¹²⁹ It is not outlandish to suggest that there may arise future scenarios where Australia and Japan will need to consider options for collective action without US participation, including in the service of peacetime or low-intensity military operations where American interest is only peripherally engaged.¹³⁰ Meanwhile, a robust bilateral

Australia-Japan defence partnership could prove a more attractive collective defence proposition for other third parties. This is particularly the case for non-aligned Southeast Asian partners, many of which remain cautious about engaging in more extensive military cooperation with the United States.¹³¹ In that context, pursuing a bilateral agenda that is at least somewhat distinguishable from trilateral cooperation – particularly with respect to the 'scope, objectives and forms' of Australia-Japan defence engagement in the region – should remain front-of-mind for policymakers in Canberra and Tokyo.

Setting realistic expectations

Policymakers in both countries will need to set realistic expectations when it comes to the scale and speed at which the bilateral relationship can be 'throttled up'¹³². This will be influenced both by lingering assumptions about 'the art of the possible' in the bilateral relationship,

new 'post-Abe' political realities in Tokyo, and deep-seated instincts in both countries to preference working with the United States rather than one another.

Firstly, it will be important for Australian policymakers to revisit long-standing assumptions about Japan's appetite for defence cooperation and the speed of its policymaking process. Notwithstanding the magnitude of Japan's defence policy changes to date, there remains a degree of pessimism among the Australian policy community regarding the pace and scale at which further policy reforms can be actioned, including progressing the bilateral defence partnership.¹³³ This stems largely from the drawn-out negotiations over the RAA which, despite how prolonged they were, never fully resolved the issues of whether or not capital punishment would apply to Australian soldiers were they to be convicted of high crimes in Japanese courts.¹³⁴ Yet there is a risk that

Australian policy experts may be underestimating the magnitude and longevity of Japan's new defence policy consensus. Indeed, Japanese officials and experts have also surprised their Australian counterparts with their willingness to move quickly on contentious defence policy issues or items that were previously weighed down by bureaucratic and political prerogatives.¹³⁵ In that sense, it will be important to ensure that these past experiences do not obscure new opportunities for real progress on key lines of effort.

Nevertheless, the pace at which Japan can action further policy changes will remain subject to changing political and economic dynamics.¹³⁶ Seasoned experts worry that the resignation of Prime Minister Kishida in August 2024 and the ruling Liberal Democratic Party's surprisingly poor performance in the October 2024 general election could limit the pace and scope at which Tokyo can move on further defence policy reforms or alliance modernisation initiatives in the coming years.¹³⁷ Kishida's own declining political fortunes had already limited his ability to make 'politically difficult decisions on defence issues' including new budget measures and niche policy reforms.¹³⁸ These will become only more difficult given Japan's new constrained political realities and considerable economic headwinds which are already reducing the purchasing power parity of new defence budget allocations.¹³⁹ As such, though the new defence policy consensus in Tokyo is unlikely to be reversed,¹⁴⁰ future Japanese leaders could find it harder to pursue more difficult reforms at the same pace as in recent years, including those that would support deeper intelligence, or operational or technological cooperation with Australia.¹⁴¹

Finally, both countries will need to consider how their instinctive preference to work with the United States, rather than each other, could constrain their own bilateral agenda. This will be important to ensure that the Australia-Japan defence relationship is not reduced to a bilateral means to a trilateral end, and to ensure that opportunities for tangible bilateral cooperation are not overlooked. For instance, while the case for Japanese use of Australian missile testing facilities is

Nevertheless, the pace at which Japan can action further policy changes will remain subject to changing political and economic dynamics.



↑ The American and Japanese contingents stand at ease, while attending the Exercise Yama Sakura 85 Opening Ceremony at Camp Asaka, Tokyo.

well understood, a lack of familiarity or specific detail about what exactly is available to the JSDF, ATLA and other relevant organisations is contributing to slow progress on realising this particular goal.¹⁴² This is not necessarily a new experience for Australia – certain forms of defence industrial cooperation with the United States, such as explosives production, have historically progressed slowly due to a lack of American insight into the capabilities and resources available in Australia.¹⁴³ In the case of Japan, this is coupled with both a structural preference for working with the United States over other defence partners, given the centrality of the US alliance to Japanese defence planning, and a renewed premium on the indigenisation of key defence capabilities.¹⁴⁴

Conclusions and recommendations

Notwithstanding the above challenges, there are a number of clear opportunities for Australia and Japan to further implement their ambitious defence agenda in the interests of enhancing both bilateral and trilateral cooperation.

Explore maritime surveillance operations

Australia and Japan should consider options for regional maritime surveillance operations, leveraging more irregular visits or formal rotations of maritime patrol aircraft through one another's facilities. Here, the two countries could take cues from the Australia-India defence partnership, where collective ASW, ISR and MDA operations over key waterways in the Eastern Indian Ocean and littoral Southeast Asia, including through reciprocal visits and coordinated activities, are increasingly common.¹⁴⁵ Australian maritime surveillance aircraft already frequent Japanese facilities for trilateral activities with the United States or sanctions enforcement against North Korea¹⁴⁶, yet these are confined to Northeast Asia. Establishing a reciprocal pattern of activities from Australian facilities would help to support the ADF and JSDF regional maritime presence in Southeast Asia

J-MSDF aircraft should include visits to Australian facilities for refuelling and maintenance in their transits to and from counter-piracy operations in the western Indian Ocean, or during Japan's annual regional Indo-Pacific Deployment.¹⁴⁷ Indeed, the JSDF has previously routed maritime aircraft through the bases of key Southeast Asian partners like the Philippines and Vietnam on their return from these deployments to assist with ISR and MDA requirements over regional waterways.¹⁴⁸ This suggests that similar arrangements could be made with Australia. The two countries could also consider hosting one another's maritime patrol assets on a fixed rotational basis. For instance, Japan could integrate into the Australia-US Maritime Domain Awareness Initiative announced at AUSMIN 2023¹⁴⁹, complementing plans to incorporate

JSDF amphibious forces into annual US-Australia activities, featuring US Marine Rotational Force-Darwin (US MRF-D).¹⁵⁰ In future, Australia could also consider dispatching P-8A or future MQ-4 Triton UAVs to participate in the US-Japan Bilateral Intelligence Analysis Cell (BIAC). This would be a logical step following the participation of Australian personnel in this arrangement, flagged in the September 2024 2+2 Joint Statement.¹⁵¹

Right-size J-GSDF rotations through Australian facilities

Canberra and Tokyo should also consider how to scope mooted Japan Ground Self Defense Force (J-GSDF) rotations through Australian facilities. Key among these considerations should be right-sizing activities for bilateral objectives, rather than simply focusing on trilateral activities with the United States. Indeed, compared against an increasingly granular trilateral agenda, there is scant public detail on how ADF-GSDF 'operational capabilities' will be developed and strengthened through bilateral exercises or force posture initiatives.¹⁵² Fortunately, there are ready-made models for the two countries to consider. Aside from MRF-D, Australia also regularly hosts Singaporean air and ground forces for deployments of up to six months under the 2015 Australia-Singapore Military Training Initiative.¹⁵³ These involve major bilateral exercises, including combined maritime task group drills focused on force integration and amphibious operations.¹⁵⁴ Among other benefits, these arrangements foster interoperability and strategic alignment between Australia and a key regional partner whose facilities Australian forces rely on to support regional presence operations.¹⁵⁵

Similar benefits could be reaped through a dedicated bilateral

arrangement with Japan.¹⁵⁶ Indeed, analysts have argued that Australia and Japan should pursue the creation of a joint amphibious task force in northern Australia, through which a JSDF amphibious landing dock and marine brigade would conduct an extended deployment to Australia to hone the 'complex air-sea-ground coordination' required for high-end amphibious operations.¹⁵⁷ This would complement the announcement of reciprocal liaison officer postings in Australia and Japan's respective Joint Operations Commands¹⁵⁸, and build on established liaison exchanges between one another's army headquarters. This could also form the basis for a named Australia-Japan army exercise, completing the trifecta of bilateral inter-service engagements and capitalising on Australia's recent participation in Exercise Yama Sakura and Exercise Keen Edge. These activities should focus narrowly on honing bilateral integration, ensuring that Australia-Japan army cooperation is strong enough to both stand apart from and in support of trilateral initiatives.

JSDF access to Australian missile ranges

More regular Japanese deployments to Australia should also involve the regular use of Australian missile testing and training ranges. This would build on the inaugural deployment of a GSDF Type-12 anti-ship missile unit to Australia as part of Exercise Talisman Sabre 2023¹⁵⁹, and stated commitments to deepen cooperation on strike capabilities.¹⁶⁰ Australian and Japanese officials have already discussed options for use of these testing ranges on several occasions this year.¹⁶¹ However, further advocacy will be essential in a context where Japan is also developing new training ranges of its own, and to offset institutional instincts to seek access to US facilities ahead of Australian alternatives.¹⁶²

There are clear advantages for Japan in accessing Australian facilities. The GSDF has announced plans for a new anti-ship missile training range on Minamitorishima Island in the Pacific Ocean – the first such facility

in Japan.¹⁶³ Yet the range of Japan's long-range strike capabilities will far exceed the capacity of this or any other facility available in the country, limiting options for realistic training. By comparison, Australia possesses several large facilities, most notably the 122,000-square-kilometre Woomera Testing Range available in southern Australia. Aside from accommodating weapons range specifications, utilising these facilities would also complicate Chinese efforts to surveil Japan's missile testing and development. Such cooperation would naturally interface with planned operational and technological cooperation centred on strike capabilities, and would help the two countries to prepare for trilateral integrated air and missile defence activities flagged for 2027 in Australia.¹⁶⁴

Japan's participation in Australia's guided weapons enterprise

Canberra and Tokyo should explore options for Japanese companies to participate in Australian defence industrial initiatives focused on the development and production of long-range strike weapons.¹⁶⁵ Though public details are limited, there are several vectors for potential collaboration in this space. On the heels of commitments in the 2024 2+2 Joint Statement to pursue greater cooperation on long-range strike capabilities, Japan's then-Defence Minister Kihara Minoru identified Tomahawk anti-ship missile production as a prime candidate for collaboration.¹⁶⁶ This would be a logical choice given the large orders placed by both Australia and Japan for these weapons through America's Foreign Military Sales program.¹⁶⁷ However, a trilateral Tomahawk production initiative could face stiff headwinds, considering that ongoing US-Australia and US-Japan missile production initiatives remain hamstrung by US export control restrictions and supply bottlenecks.¹⁶⁸

Instead, the two countries should consider options for producing Japanese-origin missiles (such as Type-12 anti-ship missiles) and their componentry in Australia. There are clear prospects for Japanese firms to participate in Australia's Guided



↑ HMAS Warramunga and Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force destroyer JS Inazuma sail in-company during Exercise Nichi Gou Trident 2021.

Weapons and Explosive Ordnance (GWEO) enterprise¹⁶⁹, considering its recent evolution into a multinational effort involving Australia, Norwegian and US companies.¹⁷⁰ For Australia, the involvement of Japanese firms would support Australian industrial base development objectives, including its overall ability to support collective defence capability requirements with the United States and other partners through developing, producing, maintaining, repairing and overhauling long-range strike weapons.¹⁷¹

For Japan, producing missiles in Australia would bring several benefits. Firstly, it would endow Japan with a degree of strategic-industrial depth that it does not enjoy geographically (as it would similarly for other potential partners like South Korea), providing it with a potential

source of production and resupply in the event of a major conflict in Northeast Asia.¹⁷² Notwithstanding its emphasis on indigenisation and local production, diversifying the production of counterstrike weapons could also ease cost and production pressures currently afflicting Japan's own defence industrial base.¹⁷³ Such cooperation would also complement Japan's interest in the use of Australia's world-class missile testing ranges, as described above.¹⁷⁴ Finally, manufacturing and technical cooperation could also feed into official discussions on how Australian and Japanese forces will engage on long-range strike operations both bilaterally and trilaterally, including the development of joint or combined operational concepts, targeting and information-sharing, and other critical issues central to the development of Japan's fledgling counter-strike doctrine.¹⁷⁵

Conclusion

Australia and Japan have never been better positioned to deliver on the vast potential of their bilateral defence relationship.

Their shared outlook of the nature of regional strategic environment, their consensus on the requirements for addressing those challenges, and the completion of the relationship's institutional and legal architecture all provide a strong foundation for expanding their military cooperation in the service of shared objectives. Notwithstanding the challenges of synchronising multiple alliance agendas, right-sizing bilateral defence cooperation, and overcoming lingering mindset and political obstacles to collaboration, there are evident pathways for Australia and Japan to give greater operational expression to their deepening strategic alignment. Seizing on these opportunities as quickly as possible should be of first-order importance for Canberra and Tokyo.

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