Japan-Australia security declaration strengthens US encirclement of China

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A joint security declaration signed by Australian Prime Minister John Howard and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on March 13 is a significant step toward the formation of a triangular US-Japan-Australia grouping directed against China.

The Japan-Australia declaration does not establish a formal military alliance like Japan's security treaty with US following World War II. However, while couched in general terms, the statement includes joint military exercises, intelligence sharing and cooperation in counter-terrorism and disaster relief. The two governments intend to draft an "action plan" setting out more specific defence arrangements.

Both Howard and Abe insisted publicly that the declaration was not aimed at China, but their words were unconvincing. The Bush administration has been pushing for closer Australia-Japan defence ties as part of its broader strategy of containing China's growing influence via a network of US allies and bases throughout the Asian Pacific region.

In March 2006, US secretary of state Condoleezza Rice met with Australian foreign minister Alexander Downer and Japanese foreign minister Taro Aso in Sydney to discuss a triangular alliance. At the time, the Australian government was wary of doing anything that might upset the country's very profitable trade in raw materials with China. Downer insisted that no reference to China be included in the final joint communiqué.

Australia's decision to sign the joint declaration with Japan therefore represents something of a shift. While he described relations with Beijing as good, Howard rather pointedly declared that the new security cooperation with Tokyo "will be closer than with any other country with exception of the United States". In other words, Australia will line up with the US and Japan in the event of any conflict with China.

Canberra has clearly been under pressure from Washington to strengthen its military ties with Tokyo. Howard backed the Bush administration's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to secure Washington's support for Australian interventions in the Pacific. He now needs US backing even more. Australian operations in East Timor and Solomon Islands have generated resentment and opposition. Moreover, Australia is increasingly confronting a Chinese challenge for political influence and raw materials in a region it has long regarded as its "backyard".

For Abe, the signing of the security declaration was also a significant step. It is the first such agreement with any country since the 1952 US-Japan Security Treaty. Japan is formally prohibited from signing a defence pact with any country by the so-called pacifist clause in its post-war constitution. But Abe has set in motion steps to hold a national referendum in May to completely revise the constitution and transform Japan into "a normal nation". By removing the pacifist clause, Japan would be able to sign full military alliances and engage in its own wars of aggression.

Like Howard, Abe is under pressure from his country's corporate elite to maintain good relations with China. His predecessor Junichiro Koizumi exacerbated tensions with China and South Korea by deliberately stirring up right-wing militarist sentiment in Japan and publicly visiting the notorious Yasukuni shrine to Japan's war dead. Abe's first trip on assuming office last September was to Beijing. However, as his poll ratings have plummeted, Abe has resorted to the same methods as Koizumi.

Most recently Abe has defended Japan's wartime record and publicly denied that Japanese troops forced Asian women to act as sex slaves in the 1930s and 1940s. In response, Chinese premier Wen Jiabao has shortened his planned visit to Tokyo in April. Even Howard was compelled to distance himself from Abe's statement, partly to placate Beijing, but also because the "comfort women" abused by Japanese troops included Australians. At the same time, Howard effectively dismissed the issue, saying: "We shouldn't allow history to be the master of what we now do and what do in the future."

The Bush administration welcomed the closer security ties between Australia and Japan. During his visit to both

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countries last month, US vice president Dick Cheney declared: "The growing closeness among our three countries sends an unmistakable message—that we are united in the cause of peace and freedom across the region." He also identified the target of these defence arrangements, criticising China's defence build-up as being "inconsistent" with its stated goal of a "peaceful rise".

The record of the three countries in Iraq gives the lie to Cheney's claims that the allies are fostering "peace and freedom". Australia and Japan backed the illegal US-led occupation to the hilt. The Howard government was one of just four countries that committed combat troops to the initial invasion in March 2003 and has maintained a military contingent there ever since. Japan used the opportunity to dispatch troops to an active overseas war zone for the first time since World War II, despite widespread opposition at home. Australian troops protected the Japanese military engineers during their stay.

The US also appears to want to extend the military arrangements with Japan and Australia to a "quadrilateral" alliance including India. According a front-page article in the *Australian* on March 15, Cheney raised the proposal with Howard when the two met in Sydney. Obviously concerned about China's reaction to another threatening move, Howard was "not against the idea in principle but does not wish to hurry the process," the newspaper reported. Abe, on the other hand, "strongly" supported the US plan to include India.

The *Australian* editorial noted the move "makes it all the more difficult to pretend that the growing web of alliances between Australia, the US and Asian nations is not about keeping China in a military box". If Beijing comes into conflict with Washington, this US-led group "might cut it [China] off from world market and resources, and upset its expanding yet fragile economy". While the editorial was in no doubt that extending the trilateral alliance to India "will be interpreted by Beijing as a threat," it concluded that an enlarged alliance "still makes sense".

The Bush administration has been trying to woo New Delhi—a major regional military power and a fast rising economy—as a strategic counterweight to Beijing. At the centre of this strategy is the US-India nuclear accord signed last year. It enables the US and other countries to supply New Delhi with nuclear technology and fuels without India having to give up its nuclear arsenal or sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). While welcoming the nuclear accord, sections of the Indian ruling elite have been reluctant to commit an alliance with the US that could bring India into open conflict not only with China, but also with long-time ally Russia.

Similarly there are concerns in Australian ruling circles about the dangers of Howard's unconditional embrace of US militarism. These sentiments were voiced by opposition Labor leader Kevin Rudd who cautiously supported closer cooperation between Australia and Japan, but warned that a full defence pact could "tie our security interests to the vicissitudes of an unknown security policy future in North East Asia".

China has played down the new Japan-Australia defence arrangement. Foreign Ministry spokesman Qin Gang said China "hoped" the reassurances offered by Abe and Howard were true. Behind closed doors, however, Chinese leaders will have drawn the obvious conclusion about the threat posed. Far from bringing "peace and freedom," the US efforts to put China "in a military box" are fuelling a dangerous arms race and exacerbating tensions across the region.

China's numerically large military is technologically inferior to the US. However, due to China's rapid economic growth, its military spending has been growing at double-digit rates for the past 18 years, disrupting the balance of power in Asia. This year Beijing increased defence spending almost 18 percent to $45 billion—on par with Japan's military budget and twice that of Australia.

To counter the US threat, China has been forging closer relations with Russia through the so-called Shanghai Cooperation Organisation which includes the Central Asia republics and, as observers, India, Pakistan, Iran and Mongolia. Russia and China are planning to hold their second large-scale joint military exercise—"Peace Mission 2007"—in Urals region in July. Russian president Vladimir Putin and Chinese president Hu Jintao will personally attend the war games, which are designed to test not just conventional weapons, but the ability of their armed forces to function during a nuclear war.

"Peace Mission 2007" is an ominous sign of what is being discussed and prepared in all of the world's capitals as economic and strategic rivalries intensify.

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