

Australian analyst points to debate on alliance with Japan

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The publication of a new paper, “An Australia-Japan Alliance?” by prominent foreign policy analyst Hugh White highlights a growing discussion within Australian ruling circles on the Labor government’s moves to develop closer military ties with Japan, opening the door for a future defence alliance.

Australian-Japanese ties have deepened since Julia Gillard became prime minister in 2010. The new relationship has been driven by the Obama administration’s strategic “pivot” to East Asia and the Pacific, which is centrally aimed at strengthening US imperialism’s military and diplomatic posture against China. Gillard has unconditionally aligned Canberra with the provocative anti-China drive, agreeing to station Marines in Darwin and provide basing support for US warships and warplanes. The Labor government has also worked with the Obama administration in courting various Asian countries as part of the strategic encirclement of China. Notably, Canberra has junked the previous ban on Australia uranium sales to India and expanded Australian-Indian joint military exercises.

The Gillard government has been quietly courting Tokyo. A communiqué issued after the fourth annual “2+2” meeting—involving the Australian and Japanese foreign and defence ministers—held in Sydney in September, described the two countries as “natural strategic partners”. It referred to a “common strategic objective” of regional stability, outlined plans for further military collaboration, and pledged that the two sides would work together “as active partners to maintain and strengthen comprehensive US engagement in the region.”

Hugh White—a former government intelligence analyst and Defence Department official, and currently professor of strategic studies at the Australian National University (ANU)—began his assessment of the Gillard government’s discussions with Japan by focussing on the “2+2” communiqué.

White noted: “This is probably the most forthright statement of common strategic purpose that Japan has made with any country except America since 1945. So for Japan it is a big deal ... At a time when US-China strategic rivalry is clearly escalating, this language unambiguously commits both countries to support ‘strengthened’ US engagement in Asia—in other words, the Pivot. And at a time when Japan’s relations with both China and South Korea are strained by serious disputes, this language seems to put Australia on Japan’s side, against two countries which are very important to us. So we have waded into pretty deep water here.”

White noted that “John Howard can claim credit for initiating the present trend towards closer defence links with Japan,” because the former Liberal Party prime minister signed a “joint declaration” on security cooperation with Japan in March 2007. At the time, then opposition leader Kevin Rudd spoke against the prospect of a defence pact with Japan, which Rudd said would “tie our security interests to the vicissitudes of an unknown security policy future in North East Asia.” The *Age* reported: “Australia cannot risk alienating China as there is no guarantee the United States will remain the dominant power in Asia, Opposition foreign affairs spokesman Robert McClelland says. Nor should it sign a defence treaty with Japan or enter formal security talks with our allies and India, which China would see as an attempt to encircle it, Mr McClelland said.”

The Australia-Japan “2+2” meetings continued after Rudd became prime minister in November 2007—but there was no further discussion of a possible strategic-defence treaty until Gillard came to office. Rudd was ousted in June 2010 via an inner Labor Party coup that involved powerbrokers with close links to Washington. The Obama administration was hostile to Rudd’s calls for an accommodation between the US and China, which cut across its plans to undercut Chinese influence throughout

the region.

Ever since Obama visited Australia in November last year and announced a stepped-up US offensive aimed at preventing any Chinese challenge to its Asia Pacific hegemony, Hugh White has articulated the concerns of a significant section of the Australian foreign policy establishment that is increasingly alarmed about Gillard's foreign policy. These interests confront an irresolvable strategic dilemma as explosive tensions develop between the US, Australia's longstanding military ally, and China, its most important economic partner. They fear that the Gillard government is committing Australia to a US-led war against China.

In his latest paper, White calls for a "pause" in any moves toward a formal strategic alliance between Australia and Japan, primarily on the grounds that it would both antagonise Beijing and lock Canberra into a war against the rising Asian power.

White declared: "[O]ur enthusiasm for an alliance with Japan, like our agreement to host US Marines in Darwin, clearly put us in the US-Japan camp, supporting what is in effect a policy of containing China ... Today in Asia every strategic issue bears on the fundamental question of the future roles of the US and China in the Asian order, on which the future of Asia, and Australia, depends."

White noted that any strategic alliance involves a commitment to go to war on behalf of one's ally. He insisted that Australia and Japan did not have the shared strategic interests for this. He argued that Canberra would not join military action against China over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands and Tokyo would never intervene in a "not entirely improbable" conflict between Australia and Indonesia over West Papua.

In reality, if Japan and China went to war over the island dispute, the US would quickly become involved—as would Australia.

White's casual references to potentially devastating regional wars underscore the immense volatility of relations between the world's major powers. Washington is relying on military force in a desperate effort to offset its economic decline and maintain its global domination against its rivals. The Obama administration is fuelling conflicts across the globe, especially in East Asia and the Pacific, where it is whipping up previously localised territorial disputes between China and its neighbours in order to deepen ties with countries, including Japan, India, Philippines and Vietnam.

In Australia, every section of the ruling elite is wedded to militarism. While the Gillard government and its

backers are rushing headlong toward a US-led war against China, critics such as White propose as an alternative a "Concert of Powers" in Asia. This reactionary proposal for an armed standoff in Asia could involve Japan becoming a nuclear-armed "independent great power", as well as Australia more than doubling its military spending, and a similarly militarised India collaborating with the US and China to share strategic power in the region. All of this, according to White, to maintain peace!

The response to White's paper on Australian-Japanese relations points to the general assumption in ruling circles that Japan's post-war stance as a "pacifist" power, with a strictly defensive military posture, is over.

Peter Jennings, executive director of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, wrote in the *Australian* that Canberra should encourage "a more normal Japan". He claimed that the central risk "is not that it will remilitarise but that it will fail to be a strong influence in shaping regional security." Like Jennings, John Blaxland, of the ANU's Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, played down the likelihood of an Australian-Japanese alliance, but insisted that "Japan is becoming an indispensable and accepted member of an ASEAN-led counterbalancing strategy against China in south-east Asia."

Philippine Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario earlier this month told the *Financial Times* that the Japanese constitution's so-called pacifist clause ought to be junked, because of the need for the country to act as a "significant balancing factor" against China.

The growing clamour by Washington and its allies for the rearming of Japan comes as the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has been returned to office in that country, following an election campaign dominated by anti-China nationalism and militarism. Incoming Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said he would pursue constitutional change to "normalise" the position of the country's military and end the "self-torturing history", i.e., recognition of Japanese war crimes in World War II. US imperialism is recklessly raising tensions in Asia to a pitch not seen since the 1930s, posing an enormous threat to the working class of the region, and the world.



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