

Australia and Japan extend military ties

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Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott used his visit to Japan on Monday to reach an agreement with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to “elevate the bilateral security and defence relationship to a new level.”

Abbott and Abe discussed expanding combined Australian-Japanese military training and improving “interoperability” between the two countries’ militaries. They also resolved to reach a “framework agreement” on cooperation on military science, technology, and equipment, with initial joint research developed on submarine-related technology. Japanese and Australian defence and foreign ministers are due to meet in Tokyo in June to work out further arrangements. “We want to see more interoperability between our militaries, we want to see more exercises between our militaries, we want to see over time more significant intelligence co-operation,” Abbott declared.

Few details have been released on what the “framework agreement” on technology and equipment will entail, but the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that it “will facilitate the development of cutting edge military science, and even the exchange of new generation weapons between the two countries.”

The discussions and agreements underscore Japan and Australia’s active collaboration with Washington’s drive to militarily encircle and diplomatically isolate China. Both right-wing governments, behind the backs of the Australian and Japanese people, have supported the Obama administration as it leads the preparations to wage war against China in order to preserve the strategic dominance of US imperialism and its allies.

Abbott’s meeting with Abe formed part of a regional tour of Japan, South Korea, and China. Billed by the government as a “trade tour”, Abbott has led a delegation of government ministers and corporate executives to the three Asian countries. The trip was timed to coincide with the announced agreement of an Australia-Japan free trade agreement, which has been

hailed in the Australian corporate media. Tariffs on 97 percent of Australian exports to Japan will be progressively reduced or removed, including for previously closed off beef, seafood, and wine markets. Japan will provide some openings for Australian finance and business services.

Sections of Australian agribusiness, however, including rice, sugar, and pork, have been scathing of the Abbott government’s failure to win significant concessions benefitting their operations. National Farmers’ Federation president Brent Finlay declared: “We are disappointed with the overall outcomes for agriculture with a number of sectors facing marginal improvements or limited commercial gains.” Mineral exports to Japan, which constitute almost 89 percent of merchandise imports, are already subject to few tariffs.

However, today’s *Australian Financial Review* editorial noted significance of closer strategic ties that had been quietly sealed. “While trade has taken up most of the headlines, Australia has also signed up to what seems an open-ended defence cooperation agreement for Japan. This is important support for Tokyo which is now locked in an increasingly tense rivalry with Beijing,” it stated.

The first point of the Abbott-Abe joint communiqué that dealt with “security and defence cooperation” stated that the two leaders “reaffirmed the importance of strong US engagement in the Asia-Pacific region and expressed their strong support for the US rebalance.”

Abbott was invited to participate in a special meeting of Abe’s National Security Council, created last December to give the prime minister greater central control over foreign and defence policy, promoting even closer coordination with Washington. The Australian PM is the first world leader to be invited to a National Security Council meeting in Tokyo. According to the *Japan News*, Abbott spent an hour “exchanging opinions on Asia-Pacific regional

circumstances” with Abe, Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga, Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida, and Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation reported that the first item on the agenda at the meeting was Japan’s dispute with China over the Diyaou/Senkaku island territories. Tensions over the islands have been deliberately inflamed in recent years, together with other previously localised territorial disputes between China and its neighbours, by the Obama administration as part of its drive to ratchet up pressure on Beijing.

Abbott gave the usual pro forma denials of any attempt to target China. “Our security cooperation [with Japan] is for universal values,” he declared, “it’s not against any specific country.”

In reality, the Abbott government has picked up where the former Labor government left off in its whole-hearted support for the provocative US “pivot” against China. The prime minister last year proclaimed that Japan was Australia’s “closest friend in Asia”, adding that Tokyo was “a fellow member of the US alliance network.” Abbott has enthusiastically backed the remilitarisation of Japan, under the guise of becoming a “normal country”—provocative language that the PM this week repeated in Tokyo. Last year the Abbott government aggressively denounced China after it expanded its air defence identification zone in the East China Sea. In doing so, Canberra implicitly endorsed Japan’s territorial claims in the region against Beijing.

Abe has eagerly embraced the Abbott government. His own government has moved to eliminate constitutional and political restrictions on the size and capacity of the Japanese military, at the same time promoting militarism and attempting to whitewash the criminal history of Japanese imperialism in East Asia. Australia plays a significant role in Abe’s calculations. When he was previously in office, he launched the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (“Quad”) in 2007, a military cooperation arrangement involving Japan, the US, India, and Australia. Just before returning to office, Abe wrote in November 2012 on the need to create a “Democratic Security Diamond”, stretching from Australia, India, Japan and the US state of Hawaii, with the four countries working together to dominate the strategically crucial maritime area.

Abbott is currently in South Korea, where he is attempting to bolster US efforts to defuse tensions between Tokyo and Seoul and ensure joint cooperation against China. The Australian prime minister also told President Park Geun Hye that the former Labor government should not have cancelled a \$225 million order for K9 Thunder field howitzers. Abbott declared the decision “capricious” and said his government would instead be an “absolutely reliable, trustworthy partner whose word is our bond.” Today he visited the demilitarised zone that separates North and South Korea. He echoed US rhetoric against North Korea, declaring the country an “outlaw state which is a threat to world peace.”

Abbott is now en route to Beijing, where he is seeking to progress negotiations on a China-Australia free trade agreement.



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