Australia, Japan forge closer military ties

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Australian and Japanese defence and foreign ministers, meeting in Tokyo this week for so-called 2+2 talks, laid out an agenda for stepped-up military collaboration throughout the Asia Pacific region. The Obama administration has encouraged closer ties between its two allies, as part of its "pivot to Asia" and preparations for war against China.

Wednesday's meeting followed a summit in April between Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott and his Japanese counterpart, Shinzo Abe, at which it was agreed to upgrade the strategic partnership between the two countries. Abe is using the developing military ties with Australia to press ahead with his efforts to remilitarise Japan, including ending constitutional restraints on the forging of military alliances and the sale of Japanese military hardware.

Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and Defence Minister David Johnston both publicly endorsed Abe's plans to "reinterpret" the Japanese constitution to permit "collective self-defence"—that is, Japanese involvement in US-led wars of aggression such as the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. "We certainly support Japan working towards a more normal defence posture to help it play a greater global and regional role," Bishop declared in Tokyo.

Abe has pushed for "a more normal defence posture" since being elected in December 2012. He has already boosted the military budget, formed a National Security Council, and eased restrictions on military exports. At last month's Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, Abe declared that Japan would play "an even greater and more proactive role" in Asia, pointing in particular to his efforts to build "a new special relationship" with Australia. Abe is due to visit Australia next month.

The joint communiqué from this week's 2+2 talks declared that the ministers had developed a "suite of recommendations" for consideration by their respective leaders to build military ties, including enhanced training and exercises, increased personnel exchanges, greater trilateral cooperation with the US, and maritime security.

Defence Minister Johnston told a news conference that closer ties with Japan would not affect relations with China. "We have a very close and productive relationship with China," he said. Such meaningless declarations will fool no-one, however, least of all in Beijing.

The communiqué implicitly blamed China for raising tensions in territorial disputes in the East China Sea with Japan, and in the South China Sea with the Philippines and Vietnam, and called for all parties to "pursue claims in accordance with international law." In fact, the Abe government refuses to even recognise the existence of a dispute with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.

Japan and China again traded accusations this week after two close encounters between military aircraft—on Tuesday, involving two Japanese F-15 fighters and a Chinese TU-154 patrol plane, and on Wednesday, Chinese fighters and two Japanese reconnaissance aircraft. Both sides blamed the other for aerial manoeuvres that run the risk of a miscalculation that could precipitate a wider conflict.

Speaking on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Lateline" program, Johnston repeated the line that Australia was "not going to take sides" in the territorial disputes, mirroring the US stance. In fact, the US, despite its professions of neutrality, has repeatedly declared that it will back Japan in any war with China over the Senkakus. Australia, via its alliance with the US and strategic partnership with Japan, will inevitably be drawn into any conflict.

The Pentagon regards both Japan and Australia as central to its plans for war against China. US bases in Japan would be the launching pad for a devastating aerial and missile blitzkrieg against the Chinese

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mainland, while Australian bases would be used to mount a blockade of Chinese shipping passing through South East Asia. Washington has been pressing both countries to collaborate more closely and to upgrade their military.

An agreement announced at the 2+2 meeting for cooperation in defence equipment and research is especially significant. It will initially focus on "marine hydrodynamics"—an area that is vital to Australian plans for a new fleet of submarines. The US insisted that Australia accelerate its plans to replace its Collins class submarines, which have been plagued with technical problems.

Defence Minister Johnston was given a rare tour of a new Soryu class submarine. It is the world's largest diesel-electric submarine and can stay submerged for almost two weeks. While Canberra is still saying that design and construction will take place in Australia, it is seeking access to Japanese technology, including the Soryu's ultra-quiet propulsion system. For Japan, involvement in Australia's submarine project, estimated to cost $37 billion, would provide a huge boost for military exports, as well as consolidate defence ties between the two countries.

Narushige Michishita, director of the security program at Japan's National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies, told the *Australian*: "Some suggest that Japan might be willing to sell the Soryu-class submarines to Australia. If it happens, that would be a big win-win for both of us."

Australia and Japan first signed a joint declaration on security cooperation in 2007 under Australian Prime Minister John Howard, when Abe was first in office. Collaboration has expanded under the US "pivot" to include an acquisition and joint servicing agreement between the two countries, which came into force last year, and an information security agreement, signed two years ago. The 2+2 talks also laid the basis for a "bilateral cyber policy dialogue" and greater cooperation in other fields such as space security.

Japan-Australia cooperation will extend to building joint economic and diplomatic efforts to strengthen ties with countries throughout the Asia Pacific—a campaign in league with the US aimed at undermining Chinese influence in the region. The communiqué reaffirmed that the two countries will focus "on support to Pacific Island countries," where Canberra is particularly concerned that Chinese aid is undercutting Australia's position in what it regards as its sphere of influence.

The military focus of the visit extended beyond formal talks. The two Australian ministers visited the key Yokota air force base on the outskirts of Tokyo, met with the high command of Japan's air defence, and held talks with the commander-in-chief of US forces in Japan, who declared that the trilateral alliance had never been stronger.

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