

Japan and Australia step up military partnership against China

Mike Head**18 November 2020**

In Tokyo on Tuesday, the prime ministers of Japan and Australia—the two closest allies of the US—struck an “in principle” agreement for mutual access for their militaries in each other’s territories, as part of the escalating Washington-led confrontation with China.

Under the plan, the two countries will take their “security and defence cooperation under [their] Special Strategic Partnership to a new level.” They will undertake more joint military exercises in key flashpoints in the Indo-Pacific, and be able to station troops in each other’s countries.

A joint statement issued by Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga and his Australian counterpart Scott Morrison did not mention China, yet it provocatively listed as areas of “serious” or “grave” mutual concerns—the South China Sea, the East China Sea and Hong Kong.

By denouncing “coercive” actions in these locations, the two governments echoed the Trump administration’s accusations of Chinese aggression and aligned themselves with the expected intensification of the conflict under a Biden administration.

Notably, in US President-elect Joe Biden’s first phone call with Suga last week, Biden said the Japan-US Security treaty, obliging the US to defend Japan if it is attacked, would apply to the disputed Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. These rocky outposts, north of Taiwan, are occupied by Japan but are also claimed by China.

Pointedly, the joint statement “welcomed the continued commitment of the United States to this region and stressed the importance of close cooperation with the United States.”

The Japan-Australia Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) forms part of an intensifying line-up against China. Last month Australian warships joined “Quadrilateral” naval exercises with the US, India and Japan in the Indian Ocean, and Japan committed itself to coming to the military aid of Australian forces anywhere in the region.

To seal those commitments, Australian Defence Minister Linda Reynolds also flew to Tokyo last month for talks on greater military co-operation and interoperability, shared operations in Chinese-claimed parts of the South China Sea,

and stepped-up military activity with the US.

These moves flow from a Quadrilateral Security Dialogue meeting between the US, India, Japan and Australia, held in Tokyo on October 6. There US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo again demonised Beijing, falsely blaming it for the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Pompeo declared that “Quad” collaboration was critical to protect against Beijing’s “exploitation, corruption, and coercion.” He named the South China Sea, along with the East China Sea, the Himalayas and the Taiwan Straits as examples of China’s alleged aggression.

The Japan-Australia RAA is the first such pact to be agreed by a Japanese government since the controversial Status of Forces Agreement signed with the United States 60 years ago. That agreement, widely opposed by Japanese people, permits large US bases in Okinawa and other parts of Japan, making them pivotal platforms in US war plans against China.

Morrison’s one-day trip to Tokyo to finalise the RAA—his first overseas journey since the COVID-19 pandemic began—highlights the commitment of successive Australian governments to fully participate in the US conflict with China. That offensive was initiated under the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia,” which President Barack Obama formally announced in Australia in 2011, hosted by the previous Labor Party government. Biden was Obama’s vice-president.

Morrison was intent on making the trip even though he must now quarantine for two weeks. For Suga, it was the first visit by another head of government since he replaced Shinzo Abe as Japan’s prime minister in September.

In a media release, Morrison again avoided any reference to China, because the Australian capitalist class relies heavily on exports to China, especially of iron ore and gas. Nevertheless, he sent an unmistakable message to Beijing.

“The significance of the RAA cannot be understated,” he declared. “It will form a key plank of Australia’s and Japan’s response to an increasingly challenging security environment in our region amid more uncertain strategic

circumstances.”

Morrison used the code words employed by US governments to justify their expanding military presence in the Indo-Pacific. He said Japan and Australia “are deeply committed to working together in support of a free, open, inclusive and stable Indo-Pacific.”

Morrison told reporters China should not fear the signing of the treaty, claiming it would help regional “stability.” In reality, it adds to the growing military encirclement of China. Japan and Australia are among the 10th and 15th biggest military spenders in the world, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

While not yet constituting a full military alliance, the access agreement sets out the use of the other country’s bases, the cost and sharing of refuelling and munitions, claims for accidents and conduct during joint exercises. This is a step toward a formal military compact.

Greg Sheridan, the US-connected foreign editor of the Murdoch media’s *Australian*, noted: “Australia and Japan, in their common alliance with the US, are as near to an Asian NATO as it gets. Japan is the only nation with which Australia has a Special Strategic Partnership. Canberra ranks this style of partnership as one rung up from a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (which, ironically we have with Beijing, among others), and just below a formal military alliance.”

In 2007, the governments of Japan and Australia signed a military cooperation agreement, also a post-World War II first for Japan with a country other than the US. The two partners agreed on sharing military supplies in 2013, and expanded the deal in 2017 to include munitions after Abe’s government cut restrictions on arms equipment transfers.

Officials had reportedly spent six years negotiating the RAA. It was stalled by Australian demands that any visiting Australian military personnel who commit serious crimes in Japan will not potentially face the death penalty. Apparently, the two governments have now agreed to resolve the issue on an unspecified case-by-case basis. The issue is contentious in Japan because US military members have been shielded from prosecution for such crimes.

The RAA does not need to be approved by the Australian parliament, but will have to be accepted by Japan’s. It amounts to another breach of Japan’s post-World War II so-called “pacifist” constitution, which Japanese governments, including Abe’s, have increasingly violated. Morrison invited Suga to visit Australia next year to formally sign the agreement.

The Suga-Morrison joint statement emphasised their “commitment to strengthening cooperation with Pacific island countries,” ostensibly in response to COVID-19. This follows demands from Washington for greater action to

block Chinese aid and influence in the impoverished Pacific states.

At the same time, the closer partnership is a response to the perceived decline in the hegemony that US imperialism established over the Asia-Pacific in World War II—a dominance on which the ruling elites in both Japan and Australia have depended for their own predatory activities in the region.

The latest indication of that decline came last Sunday when 15 Asia-Pacific nations signed a trade and economic pact—the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)—that includes China, as well as Japan and Australia, and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), but not the US.

Morrison’s trip to Tokyo suffered two revealing setbacks. First, hopes of establishing a “travel bubble” between the two countries were dashed by a third wave of COVID-19 in Japan, which had a record number of infections last week, as well as by an outbreak in South Australia.

Second, a planned stopover by Morrison in Papua New Guinea (PNG) to reassert Australia’s dominance in its former colony in the face of Chinese aid and investment had to be cancelled after PNG Prime Minister James Marape lost his shaky coalition government’s majority in parliament.



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