

With Indo-Pacific tensions rising, Japan and Australia strengthen military ties

By Mike Head
19 January 2018

Japan and Australia will step up their military partnership, including by holding their first joint exercises involving jet fighters, following a remarkable one-day visit to Tokyo by Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull yesterday.

In the space of 24 hours, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe personally escorted Turnbull to a military base to watch drills by elite special forces troops, took him into a meeting of the National Security Council (NSC), Japan's top-level war cabinet, and hosted a state dinner for him. The pair also staged a full media conference and issued a joint statement.

Bloomberg described Abe's accompaniment of Turnbull to the Narashimo base outside Tokyo as "a highly unusual honour for a foreign leader." At the base, the two prime ministers posed for photographs alongside Australian-made armoured troop carriers and a Patriot missile-defence system, part of a US network designed to give the US and its allies the offensive capacity to launch missile attacks and block any retaliation.

A source from Abe's office said Turnbull was invited to the NSC because it was the "control tower of security policy." Abe established the US-style NSC in December 2013 to centralise foreign and military policy under the prime minister, while its work is kept hidden from the public by anti-democratic state secrecy laws.

In the context of the tensions being ratcheted up by the Trump administration on the Korean Peninsula, and Washington's threats of trade war and confrontation against China, Turnbull's visit constitutes another warning that all the major powers in the Indo-Pacific region are preparing for war.

The feting of Turnbull is a measure of Abe's desire to consummate a closer alliance with Australia, both to

counter China's growing influence and assist his drive to remilitarise Japan, including by changing the country's post-World War II pacifist constitution by 2020. Abe also regards Australia as a linchpin in cementing the "Quadilateral"—a military alliance between the two countries plus the US and India, the region's supposed "democratic" powers—directed against China.

For Tokyo, the "Quad" is a critical military and ideological platform for combating China's "One Belt, One Road" project across Eurasia and pursuing Japan's own ambitions to reassert its status as a global power. In 2007, Australia's Howard government accepted Abe's invitation to form the "Quad," but that decision was reversed in 2008 by the Rudd Labor government, which sought to balance somewhat between the US, Australian capitalism's predominant military ally, and China, its largest export market. Last November, during President Donald Trump's Asian tour, Turnbull agreed to resume the formation.

Contrary to expectations generated in the media, Turnbull and Abe failed to finalise a "Reciprocal Access Agreement" that would give the Japanese military access to Australian bases, and vice-versa. Such a pact, if concluded, would be the first of its kind for Japan, which has a Status of Forces Agreement allowing tens of thousands of US troops to be permanently stationed in the country, but does not envisage Japanese forces visiting the US.

Japan's military would be able to train, and test weapons, on Australia's sprawling military bases and intensify joint war games and information-sharing. No explanation was given for the delay in concluding the agreement. At the media conference, Turnbull said it was a "complex matter." In their communiqué, the two prime ministers "underscored the importance" of such

a pact and “directed all relevant ministers to conclude the negotiations as early as [is] feasible.”

In the interim, Turnbull and Abe announced new military exercises in Japan later this year, the first to be held between the two air forces, as part of an intensified relationship. According to the joint statement: “The two leaders directed their respective ministers of defence to pursue even deeper and broader defence co-operation in 2018, including exercises, operations, capacity building, navy, army and air force visits, and further co-operation on defence equipment.”

Turnbull was at pains to deflect journalists’ questions that the strengthening of ties was directed against China, but no other conclusion can be drawn. A commentary earlier this month in China’s *Global Times*, a state-controlled tabloid affiliated with the *People’s Daily*, criticised the Japan-Australia security relationship as a “threat to peace.”

Moreover, both Abe and Turnbull aligned themselves with the Trump administration in further ratcheting up the threats against North Korea, knowing that any US-led war on the Korean Peninsula would menace neighbouring China. At a gathering of US allies in Vancouver, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson had just reiterated Washington’s military “option.”

Turnbull said he agreed with Tillerson that “military options should remain on the table.” Like Tillerson, both Turnbull and Abe provocatively accused Pyongyang of using its agreement with South Korea to participate in next month’s Winter Olympics as a screen behind which to further develop weapons.

“Despite the ongoing North-South talks, North Korea is continuing to develop nuclear and missile weapons and the situation is actually worsening,” Abe said at the media conference. “There can be no stability in the Asia-Pacific without denuclearisation.”

Turnbull insisted that the North had a history of misleading the world. “They have a long habit of ratcheting up militarisation and then going into a lull for a while, trying to persuade people they are changing their ways, changing nothing, and then ratcheting up again,” he said.

This again stands reality on its head. Since the 1994, successive US administrations have reneged on deals struck with the North for it to denuclearise in return for the lifting of punishing sanctions on the country. Cynically, Washington has exploited the North’s

supposed “nuclear threat” as a pretext to build up US military forces in the region, encircling China.

Japan-Australia military ties have grown since 2007, when Abe signed a joint declaration on security cooperation with one of Turnbull’s predecessors, John Howard. In 2014, Turnbull’s immediate predecessor, Tony Abbott, joined Abe in declaring a “special strategic partnership.”

The deepening of military linkages accords with the Trump administration’s “America First” policy of requiring US allies to expand, and pay for, their own military capacities and joint networks.

At the same time, Abe and Turnbull also sought to breathe life back into the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), an economic bloc that Trump dumped 12 months ago.

Turnbull indicated that a reconfigured TPP could be signed by trade ministers at a meeting in Chile in March, even if some other countries, such as Canada and Mexico, pulled out of the deal. “Prime Minister Abe and I are personally committed to having this deal signed and sealed by March,” Turnbull told a business lunch in Tokyo.

Turnbull said the US would be encouraged to join in the future. Nevertheless, the bid to revive the TPP points to real fears in Japanese and Australian ruling circles that Washington’s aggressive protectionism and threats of trade war measures, especially against China, could plunge the region and the world into a depression.

On both the military and economic fronts, the decay of America’s post-war economic domination and its ever-greater resort to militarism are turning the Indo-Pacific into a tinderbox.

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