



The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus

in-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

Australia's New Security Bond With Japan

By Paul Kelly

[As Japan and South Korea strengthen and expand the scope of their subordinate security relations with the United States, in China's shadow other moves are afoot across the Asia Pacific. Here Paul Kelly assesses the deepening Japan-Australia security bond that grows in part from their engagement in support of US war aims in Iraq.]

John Howard has long said Japan is Australia's most important relationship in Asia, so Alexander Downer's initiative for an Australia-Japan security agreement possesses a political logic that seals a new history.

It is the latest twist in a century-old saga. Japan was present at the creation of Australian identity by escorting the Anzacs to Gallipoli in World War I and then when it fought the Australian troops at Kokoda in World War II.

The cycle is friend-enemy-friend.

The proposed new security agreement was floated by the Foreign Minister during his visit to Tokyo last week in talks with Japan's Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro and Chief Cabinet Secretary Abe Shinzo, who is expected to become the next prime minister."



Foreign Minister Alexander Downer

Abe, an assertive nationalist who has campaigned for the prime ministership by seeking a strengthening of Japan's alliance with the US, warns against the threat from China and calls on Japan to develop closer strategic ties with Australia and India.

While Downer's initiative is constructive, its politics are complex and far-reaching. In an interview with *The Weekend Australian*, Downer says Australia-Japan relations are undergoing "a complete transformation".

Cabinet's national security committee has recently endorsed a Downer submission for a negotiating framework to advance Australia-Japan bilateral ties. This continues one of the Howard Government's most challenging foreign policy projects, without precedent in Australia's history, of seeking simultaneously to deepen our military and security ties with the US and Japan while deepening our economic and political ties with China.

It has been assumed the policy's success depends on US-China ties. Yet the great uncertainty in Asia is the unpredictable and emotionally charged path of Japan-China ties, the vital nexus on which Australia's success depends. As the power balance in East Asia changes to reflect the rise of China, strategic calculations in Tokyo are being recast.

"We talked about a security agreement during my recent visit," Downer says. "This was by far the best trip I have had to Japan as Foreign Minister. We are now seeing a complete change in Japan's attitudes from where they were previously. We believe a security agreement is something to explore. That's where we are now and Japanese and Australian officials will examine it. We aren't talking about a treaty like ANZUS but a formal security relationship. It's a little like what we are talking about with Indonesia."

The irony of Australia's most recent Iraq commitment has been to seal a new defence link with Japan. Australian forces in al-Muthanna province worked in collaboration with Japanese engineers and other personnel. This historic Japanese deployment was a success: there were no Japanese fatalities. Each meeting Downer held in Tokyo began with expressions of Japan's thanks for Australia's troop support.



Australian forces protect Japanese SDF in Operation Catalyst in Iraq, March, 2006.

"People should understand the significance of our commitment in al-Muthanna," Downer says. "We were asked to provide security for Japan's personnel and we wouldn't have made the commitment if not for this role with Japan." For Downer, the Iraqi commitment has had a "cathartic effect" on bilateral relations. He argues "the Japanese see Australia now as a truly valued security partner".

A deeper Australia-Japan security bond fits exactly into US strategy. In March this year in Sydney the new trilateral security dialogue involving the US, Japan and

Australia held its first ministerial level meeting, attended by Condoleezza Rice, Downer and Japan's Foreign Minister Taro Aso, amid anxious denials that it represented any containment-of-China strategy.

Downer's initiative comes against his family background. His father, Alexander, was a prisoner of war in Changi for 3 1/2 years and as a federal MP opposed the Japanese peace treaty but supported the Menzies government's 1957 commerce treaty with Japan, a pact that has helped to shape Howard's Liberal Party view of the Japan relationship.

Although the World War II legacy has no ongoing currency in Australia, it remains critical in Japan and China. Abe, campaigning for the top job, argues that Japan's post-war pacifist constitution is incompatible with its strategic challenges. "Japan has reached a point where we can no longer manage the gap between the nation's security and the constitution's interpretation," he said recently.

Abe has defended Koizumi's visits to the Yasukuni shrine which honours war dead, including Japan's war criminals. He has raised the prospect of a pre-emptive strike on North Korea and seeks to rally Japanese sentiment against what he sees as Chinese bullying over the war legacy. If elected, Abe, 51, will be representative of a younger generation. He will push the direction set by Koizumi and has warned China against trying to exploit the Yasukuni issue.

Asked during his Japan visit about the new security ties, Downer said that "it's only natural that there should be some association between the Self Defence Force and the Australian Defence Force". Interviewed this week he said: "Both Australia and Japan have sophisticated defence forces. I think they can play an effective role in the region and co-operation might be in relief emergencies or in peacekeeping."

Downer envisages the two forces getting to know each other via joint exercises and training. This builds upon their humanitarian co-operation in Aceh and earlier peacekeeping in East Timor. He did not rule out joint exercises in Australia but drew a distinction with the "aggressive military training" the ADF undertook with the US military.

After his talks with Abe, Downer said he was "struck by how upbeat he was about the relationship with Australia" but added "that's very much the mood of the Japanese Government as a whole".

The proposed security agreement coincides with Australia's push for a free trade agreement between Australia and Japan, a standard part of the Howard Government's diplomatic technique. Downer said this week the FTA was "a logical extension of our broader diplomacy, a logical extension of our security policy and a logical extension of our long-running campaign for greater trade liberalisation". He predicted that "the Japanese may very well agree next year", the 50th anniversary of the 1957 commerce treaty.

"I am pretty optimistic about that," Downer told parliament.

The Howard-Koizumi relationship has been underestimated as the bridge towards deeper bilateral links. From the moment he became PM, Howard wanted closer ties with Japan but struggled to convert his attitude into action. The critical factor is Japan's changed outlook, driven by alarm over North Korea's nuclear option and the need for a new Asian power balance to manage China.

Asked about China, Downer says: "We are opposed to a policy of containment of China. We believe that the best way forward is working constructively with China."

This is the Howard-Downer mantra. Of course, it is the correct policy. But the fascinating test is whether Australia has the sophistication in its foreign policy to manage the parallel deepening in ties with China as well as Japan.

Paul Kelly is Editor-at-large of The Australian.

This editorial appeared at The Australian on August 12, 2006 and at Japan Focus on August 19, 2006.