In the immediate aftermath of its inauguration in September 2013, the Coalition Government led by Prime Minister Tony Abbott publicly called Japan “Australia’s best friend in Asia,” suggesting the new government’s intention to further promote the already-strong Japan-Australia strategic partnership. Through the reciprocal visits by both prime ministers in the following year of 2014, Japan and Australia jointly launched an emblematic banner for bilateral relations, namely a new “Special Relationship.” No one can fully appreciate the symbolic weight of this new nickname without reference to its historical analogy of the UK-US “special relationship,” a famous phrase once put forth by British Prime Minister Winston Churchill back in the 1950s. This short commentary aims to analyse the security aspect of this emerging “new special relationship” as well as the Abbott Government’s security strategy, which is one of the key driving forces for the renewed bilateral momentum.

**1. Australia as a Part of the Anglosphere**

One important hint to Prime Minister Abbott’s perspective on foreign policy is the concept of the Anglosphere which he repeatedly emphasised in his speeches as the then leader of the opposition and in his book titled *Battlelines*. He explained that the modern world has been shaped by the Anglosphere countries first led by the United Kingdom and later by the United States. Although the Anglo-sphere is often translated into a grouping of the English-speaking countries such as United Kingdom, United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia, Mr Abbott’s primary intention is not to highlight the shared language or cultural ties. Instead his concept primarily emphasises the common political values of freedom and democracy, deeply rooted in the Anglosphere history through the Magna Carta, Provisions of Oxford and the Glorious Revolution.

Based upon such history-based confidence, the Abbot Government is retuning the direction of Australia’s Indo-Pacific strategy. The most important element in this context is the new government’s greater emphasis on the alliance with the United States, a country which in Mr Abbott’s view has not just inherited but even further empowered the Anglo-sphere project after the decline of the UK. In short, the Abbot Government places a high confidence in the continuing role of the United States in 21st century Asia.

Indeed, for decades the commitment to the Australia-US alliance has enjoyed a broad bipartisan consensus in Australian politics. To remind the readers, it was the previous Labor Governments (2007-2013) that made important steps to upgrade the alliance by agreeing on the Force Posture Initiatives and allowing the US Marine Corps to rotate through Darwin in the Northern
Territory of Australia since April 2012, as well as announcing installation of the US assets for space situational awareness; surveillance telescopes and e-band radar. The record of the Labor Government, such active cooperation with the US Rebalance, is unmistakable evidence that, in a broad sense, the alliance enjoys a bipartisan commitment in Australian politics.

In the meantime, however, the fact stands clear that the Labor Governments occasionally appeared reluctant to develop alliance cooperation with the US. For example, the Julia Gillard Government (2010-2013) deliberately chose not to expand the aforementioned Force Posture Initiatives beyond the Marine Corps rotation. Most notably, the Gillard Government avoided proceeding with a proposed idea of enhancing US air force bombers access to Australia as there were some concerns within the cabinet about China’s perceptions and reactions to such allied cooperation. In comparison, the first year of the Abbott Government already witnessed some early signs of its strategic intention to advance the Force Posture Initiatives, including the US Navy’s increased visits to Australia, and a Force Posture Agreement treaty which was signed in July 2014 in order to legally articulate the terms of force posture initiatives, such as cost-sharing.

Another policy initiative which suggests the Abbott Government’s robust commitment to the alliance is the increase of the defence budget. The previous Labor Government reduced the defence budget by about ten percent down from 1.79 percent of GDP in FY 2011-2012 to 1.56 percent in FY 2012-2013, which the opposition leader Abbott heavily criticised, not least because the United States. in his view had concerns. The Abbott Government has reversed this trend and continued to increase the budget as follows: 1.8 percent in FY 2014-2015, and 1.97 in FY 2015-2016 (roughly A$31.9 billion), effectively moving towards the government’s long term goal of GDP two percent level spending. Then Defence Minister David Johnston noted that such consistent increases of the defence budget helped strengthen Australia’s weight as a strong ally for the United States.

On top of that, the Abbott Government visibly adjusted Australia’s China policy in ways that emphasise Australia as a strong and close ally of the United States. The Gillard Labor Government was known for its sensitive care as to how China perceived its foreign policy moves. Its capstone defence policy document or Defence White Paper 2013 was carefully worded so that it did not send confrontational messages to China. The Gillard Government’s China sensitivity was explicitly criticized by Mr Andrew Shearer, who has become Prime Minister Abbott’s Senior Adviser for National Security. Mr Shearer characterised the Gillard Government’s concerns about China’s reactions as “self-censorship”, proposing that instead Australia should rather speak up and join like-minded countries in voicing international concerns about the risks posed by the rise of China. Consistent with Mr Shearer’s argument, the Abbott Government appears more willing to send strategic messages to China as observed in its clear public criticism of China’s November 2013 announcement on the so-called Air Defence Identification Zone over the East China Sea and the on-going land reclamation activities in the South China Sea as well as continuing efforts to build artificial instalments on those structures. Prime Minister Abbott defended such a more explicit attitude in expressing Australia’s criticisms about China’s assertive moves as a reflection of its commitment to be a “strong ally” for the United States.

Indeed, the Abbott Government’s policy initiatives to strengthen the alliance and explicitly signal concerns to
China appear consistent with his Anglo-sphere idea, which emphasises the historic ties among the countries led by the United States, and which share universal political values. This should not be, however, taken as any fundamental revolution of Australia’s Indo-Pacific strategy. Rather, it is worth highlighting that the Abbott Government’s foreign policy shift only constitutes some retuning within, rather than a radical departure from the broad bipartisan consensus on Australia’s foreign policy. The important evidence in this context is the fact that the Abbott Coalition Government does remain committed to actively engaging China and importantly still retains some due attention to the rising dragon’s perceptions about Australia’s security policies, albeit to a much lesser extent than the previous Labor Governments. For one thing, the Abbott Government inherits the Sino-Australian “Strategic Partnership” building project initiated by Prime Minister Julia Gillard in April 2013, which institutionalizes an annual summit meeting, foreign strategic dialogue and so forth.

Additionally, the following episode suggests that even the Abbott Government pays a degree of attention to China’s potential concerns about Australia’s foreign policy. In the May 2015 Congressional hearing, US Assistant Secretary David Shear described the on-going Australia-US discussions on enhanced access for US Air Force B-1 bombers in the context of dealing with China’s assertive moves in the region. The Abbott Government played down Mr Shear’s statement and clearly tried to reassure China by saying that the Australia-US alliance is not directed against any third country. In this sense, even though it is true that the Abbott Government is more willing and active in voicing concerns about China than the previous Gillard Government, this in no way means that Australia has stopped caring about China’s perceptions and reactions.

2. Implementation of a New Special Relationship

Given Prime Minister Abbott’s emphasis on the Anglo-sphere and history-rooted, value-oriented ties among the United States, the United Kingdom and other like-minded countries, the analogy of British Prime Minister Churchill’s phrase for the Japan-Australia security relations appears to hold a real symbolic weight. In fact, the Abbott Government further promotes Australia’s long standing recognition of Japan as a key ally for the United States and hence expects Japan to become an even stronger partner for Australia, which underpins the ongoing efforts to build a New Special Relationship between the two countries. In fact, Australia and Japan have been engaged in at least following three initiatives to turn the symbolism of the New Special Relationship into a real security policy collaboration between the two countries.

Reciprocal Access Agreement

Firstly, another treaty proposal is being discussed between the two countries with a view to strengthening the reciprocal access for the Australian Defence Force (ADF) and the Japanese Self-Defense Force (JSDF) to operate in each other’s territorial seas, airspace and land. The outcome of the Abe-Abbott summit in July 2014 stated the two governments’ intention to discuss a treaty which streamlines the legal, administrative and policy procedures so as to facilitate the two countries’ defence forces to conduct joint operations and training in their respective territories. The increasingly active joint training and operations between the ADF and the JSDF have prompted the two countries to consider such a new arrangement, called a Reciprocal Access Agreement. In responding to the March 11 triple disaster, the ADF actively supported the disaster relief operations by the JSDF and US forces by operating up to three RAAF C-17s in Japanese airspace while three countries also started conducting joint training on the
territorial land of Japan and Australia, including the Michinoku Alert 2014 in Miyagi prefecture and the annual Southern Jackaroo exercise in Victoria, Australia. Building upon this momentum, now Japan and Australia are seeking ways to allow each other to participate in their alliance exercises, as has been seen in the JSDF’s first participation in the large scale biannual Australia-US exercise, Talisman Sabre, in 2015. In light of such deepening of the joint training activities, it is natural that now the two countries are jointly considering ways to facilitate the presence and activities of their defence forces in each other’s sovereign territories so that both the strategic ties and inter-operability be further promoted under the banner of the New Special Relationship. (On a related note, even though the idea of a new treaty arrangement was already discussed under the previous Labor Government, which was then to be called the Defence Cooperation Agreement, the then foreign minister Bob Carr revealed in his published memoir that concerns about China’s perceptions and reactions prevented the Australian Government from proceeding with bilateral discussions.)

Even though what specific legal and administrative facilitation items are actually under consideration has not been released yet in the public domain, some general directions can be reasonably inferred. Taking HADR operations for an example, the Model Act for the Facilitation and Regulation of International Disaster Relief and Initial Recovery Assistance, a joint publication by the IFRC, OCHA and Inter-Parliamentary Union, helps understand some general legal questions with regard to the military activities in disaster responses. It highlights, for example, the entry of military units with their medical tools and medicines as one issue that may slow their deployment, and how hence it would be ideal if some legal prearrangement could be installed to facilitate customs and quarantine processes. The use of certain items and equipment on foreign soil can be another legal issue which may impede effective and timely delivery of assistance for the affected people at a critical time. If the Japan-Australia reciprocal access agreement under discussion could address those legal issues, that would help the deepening of joint operations and training being conducted in both countries.

**Defence Equipment and Technology Cooperation**

Secondly, the two governments are discussing possible defence equipment and technology cooperation. In fact, the year 2014 witnessed concrete progress on this front with the treaty for the transferring of defence equipment signed by the two prime ministers in July, and possible cooperation for Australia’s Future Submarine Project announced after the defence ministerial meeting in October. Indeed, it is extremely hard for social science scholars such as the author to discuss the submarine development cooperation, or for that matter any equipment issue, as they are involved with highly technical and confidential operational, technological and industrial issues. Therefore it must be stressed that there are inherent difficulties with analysis of this particular item. Even so, at least the publicly available information about Australian submarine operations in general highlight some overall strategic implications of such cooperation. The ADF’s “Primary Operational Environment” concept and the accompanying explanations suggest that the eastern waters of the Indian Ocean and the southern half of the maritime Southeast Asia seem to be a focus of its operational assumptions, while it is publicly known that Australia submarines frequently have operated, for example, in the South China Sea, for both international training and ISR activities. Given all this information, one could argue that any cooperation for Australia’s submarine development can contribute to Australia, a close US ally, continuing to operate robust undersea warfare
capabilities in those waters of increasing strategic significance. Given that the Competitive Evaluation Process, in which Australia aims to select an appropriate international partner for the future submarine program is still underway and nothing specific has yet been announced at this stage, it is premature to go into any further concrete discussions on specific ramifications of such equipment cooperation until the results of the aforementioned selection process are announced in the future.

**Further Cooperation for Architecture Building**

Thirdly, ways to deepen bilateral cooperation for regional security architecture are being pursued. Indeed, Japan and Australia have a long and active record of close cooperation for building and shaping regional security architecture, as has been seen in the episodes of APEC creation in 1989 and the establishment of the East Asia Summit in 2005, while supporting US engagement in the Asia-Pacific through the respective alliance, trilateral mechanisms and other ad hoc coalitional activities. Building upon those long standing items of the two countries’ cooperation, there are two policy issues of growing importance for Japan and Australia as follows.

One emerging focus of Japan-Australia cooperation in this regard is defence engagement with ASEAN. The key commonality between Japan’s Proactive Contribution to Peace strategy and Australia’s Indo-Pacific engagement is a renewed emphasis on the importance of ASEAN’s centrality, resiliency and integrity, which suggests the two countries’ cooperation in engaging ASEAN is an increasingly important item for the Japan-Australia new special relationship. On top of this, another trend is that defence cooperation among ten countries has been becoming active particularly for the last few years as the ASEAN Chiefs of Defence Force Forum has been formally institutionalised and ten countries are now pursuing an ambitious project of building an ASEAN Ready Group, which is a ASEAN team of military personnel drawn from the ten ASEAN defence forces in order to better respond to regional natural disasters (“one ASEAN, one Response”). In light of such increasingly active defence cooperation among ASEAN, Japanese and Australia engagements with ASEAN have been progressively deepened in defence fields such as HADR. In fact, the Japanese Ministry of Defense and the Australian Department of Defence have started cooperating closely in this context through, for example, Australia’s active support for the Expert Working Group on HADR under ADMM Plus, which is co-chaired by Japan until 2017. Japan and Australia are planning to closely collaborate in assisting the capacity building of Southeast Asian countries. In particular, Japan, Australia and the United States have been in close consultations to determine how their three countries can cooperate in assisting Southeast Asian countries to build maritime security capacities. Even though those engagement projects may not see any concrete and direct results in the short term, their continuing assistance for ASEAN integration as well as the capacity building of the individual countries, in the long run, might amount to a significant support for the ten countries to become more capable of dealing with external challenges both individually and collectively.

Another emerging issue facing Japan-Australia cooperation in the context of regional security architecture has to do with China’s increasingly active attitude in not just engaging but even initiating and proposing new multilateral projects. Against this backdrop, what has gathered the widest international attention is the whole issue of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). China’s activeness in this regard is, however, not confined to the financial field
but also seen in the security multilateral business as well; to name a few items, China’s recent activities include the Xiangshan Forum being upgraded into a larger-scale track 1.5 dialogue, the hosting of an international multilateral conference on humanitarian demining or CNIDAH, and the joint co-organising of the DiREx 2015, a biannual disaster relief exercise of ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). For a long time, perhaps the primary question with regard to engaging China in multilateral institutions has been as to how the regional countries can invite and integrate China into the existing frameworks or ones being led by countries other than China. In the meantime, another emerging policy issue is the question of how countries like Australia and Japan should approach the multilateral initiatives promoted by China. Even though one may generally welcome China’s active engagement in contributing to regional architecture building, there can be concerns about the potential overlapping of China-led initiatives and the existing frameworks in their missions and activities, which could be problematic in terms of resource allocations in the region. Another worry may emerge if multilateral institutions designed by China appear inconsistent and conflictive with the idea of an open and inclusive Asia, which Australia and Japan have been actively promoting for more than three decades.

**3. Prospects of the New Special Relationship** 

Although for a long time Japan-Australia defence cooperation has been characterised as a partnership largely focusing on the so-called non-traditional security fields, under the new banner of the New Special Relationship, the two countries appear to be pursuing deeper and more active cooperation in traditional areas as well by, for example, discussing potential submarine development cooperation and pursuing the maritime security capacity building assistance for Southeast Asian countries, as this commentary already discussed. Indeed at the time of writing this article, the efforts to build the New Special Relationship are still at a preliminary stage and it is premature yet to assess its full nature, let alone its implications. In fact, future developments of the New Special Relationship are likely to be influenced by at least the following three important variables.

First, the on-going review and reform on the defence policies in both countries could give direct implications for Japan-Australia defence cooperation. The Abbott Government is reviewing Australia’s capstone defence policy statement, or Defence White Paper 2015, with the aim of completing the process within the year 2015. The results of the White Paper review, including the Government’s decisions on the submarine development and its underlining strategic thinking, will likely influence the ways that the defence equipment and technology cooperation between Tokyo and Canberra may develop in the future. Likewise, Japan’s ongoing discussions regarding security legislation, in which the JSDF’s operations involving logistical support for international coalitions and international peace cooperation activities are also being revisited, and may have long-term impacts upon the nature of and scope of Japan-Australia defence cooperation as well.

Second, the prospects of domestic politics in both countries are worth our attention. Under the Abe and Abbott Governments, the security and defence cooperation between Tokyo and Canberra has been progressively enhanced not least because the domestic politics of both countries have regained relative stability. Under its previous governments, Japan bitterly experienced a so-called “twisted Diet,” where the ruling party could not secure a majority in both legislative chambers, frequent changes of prime ministers and the intra-party political struggles within the then-ruling
Democratic Party of Japan. Similarly Australia too suffered the endless political struggles between Mr Kevin Rudd and Ms Julia Gillard while the then-ruling Labor Party failed to secure a majority in the House after the 2010 Election. Such unstable domestic politics did impact on Japan-Australia relations by slowing the ratification process of the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement, for example. This situation has been in many ways overcome after both the Abbott and Abe Governments have established secure foundations in the Parliament/Diet. One emerging uncertainty in this context, however, is the domestic political standing of Prime Minister Abbott. As the general election in 2016 gets nearer, his continuing low approval rating has started gathering more and more attention in Australia. In fact, a confidence vote for his party leadership was conducted in this January, which clearly indicates that support in his own party is somewhat fluctuating. Indeed, Australian domestic politics and its impacts on the domestic political standing of the Abbott Government continue to deserve close attention if one wishes to closely watch the developments of Japan-Australia security relations.

The third issue has to do with the management of mutual expectations. The Abbott Government has repeatedly expressed its support for Japan’s ongoing security review processes, including the security legislation discussions, noting that Australia welcomes Japan to assume a more “normal defence posture.” In the meantime, however, given that it is highly inconceivable for the foreseeable future to see the JSDF conducting similar operations to ADF’s ongoing strike missions against ISIL or the training support for Iraqi special forces, there will likely remain a huge gap between the JSDF and ADF in terms of what operational options there are for each of the two countries, even after the completion of the security legislations according to the proposed new bills. In this context, closer dialogue between Tokyo and Canberra about the implications of the security legislation upon both the JSDF’s operational foundations as well as the future nature of Japan-Australia defence cooperation may become all the more important accordingly, so that Australia’s expectations for Japan continue to be based upon the realistic understanding of Japan’s new legal foundation for its security strategy.

Similarly, managing Japan’s expectations for Australia is an equally important issue as well. Recently the policy and scholarly discussions within Japan often refer to Australia as “a quasi-ally” or Australia-Japan relations as “a de-facto alliance.” One key factor behind the emergence of such discourses is the perception about Australia as a country which is willing to closely collaborate with Japan in managing the rise of China. Clearly the analysis of this commentary suggests that such a policy assumption is not necessarily a misplaced one. In the meantime, however, it should not be dismissed that the Abbott Government remains committed to Sino-Australian Strategic Partnership, as his Labor predecessors consistently did, and has even expanded the bilateral relations by most importantly concluding a bilateral FTA last November. Against this backdrop, Japan should not forget that even the Abbott Government carefully pays a certain degree of solicitous attention as to how China perceives and reacts to Australian foreign policy. This point was well highlighted in Prime Minister Abbott’s welcome remarks for Prime Minister Abe’s visit to the Australian Parliament last July. While praising the development of the bilateral relations as well as Japan’s constructive roles over 70 years of its post-war history, Prime Minister Abbott made the statement in somewhat abrupt manners as follows:
I stress, ours is not a partnership against anyone; it’s a partnership for peace, for prosperity and for the rule of law. Our objective is engagement and we both welcome the greater trust and openness in our region that is exemplified by China’s participation in this year’s RimPac naval exercises."

This passage suggests that Prime Minister Abbott aimed to send reassuring messages to China and intended to demonstrate this in front of Japanese delegations. In this sense, the Japanese policy makers and scholars should be reminded that the question of how Japan thinks of and deals with Australia’s continuing concern with China’s perception of Japan-Australia relations remains a key policy issue in the emerging New Special Relationship between Tokyo and Canberra.

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