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## INDEXING & ABSTRACTING

- Academic Index
- Bielefeld Academic Search Engine (BASE)
- Columbia International Affairs Online (CIAO)
- Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ)
- EBSCO Publishing Inc.
- EconLit
- EconPapers
- Genamics JournalSeek
- IDEAS
- Index Islamicus
- Infomine
- International Bibliography of Book Reviews of Scholarly Literature in the Humanities and Social Sciences (IBR)
- International Bibliography of Periodical Literature in the Humanities and Social Sciences (IBZ)
- International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS)
- International Relations and Security Network (ISN)
- Lancaster Index to Defence & International Security Literature
- Peace Palace Library
- Research Papers in Economics (RePEc)
- Social Sciences Information Space (SOCIONET)
- Ulrich's Periodicals Directory

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## RESEARCH ARTICLES

**6**

**Defining Peace: A content analysis of Brazil's, China's, and the European Union's discourses on the Ukraine War**

*By Luis Gouveia Junior*

**23**

**State Intervention in the Public and Private Spheres in Times of Crisis: Covid-19 Pandemic**

*By Dilber Akbaba*

**49**

**The Judgment of Climate Change on Food Availability in Nigeria**

*By Olubunmi David Apeloko, Celestina Ekene Chukwudi, Fadeke Esther Olu-Owolabi & Samuel Ezennia*

**76**

**NATO PA's Role in Consolidating Article 2 of the Atlantic Alliance Treaty**

*By Nádia Teresa dos Santos Loureiro*

**90**

**The Regional Security Complex Theory and Energy Triangle of EU-Turkey-Russia**

*By Mehmet Ferhat Firat*

**101**

**Beyond the Quasi-Alliance? An Analysis of the Japan-Australia Special Strategic Partnership**

*By Daisuke Akimoto*



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# Beyond the Quasi-Alliance? An Analysis of the Japan-Australia Special Strategic Partnership

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## ABSTRACT

*This article examines a pathway of the Japan-Australia “special strategic partnership” in recent years. Both countries have developed a special strategic partnership, referred to as a “quasi-alliance”. Hence, the purpose of this research is to contextualise the development of the Australia-Japan quasi-alliance from global, regional, and bilateral perspectives. Globally, the quasi-alliance has been influenced by power transition and hegemonic competition in global politics. Regionally, the quasi-alliance has been embedded into the trilateral and multilateral strategic frameworks in the Indo-Pacific. Bilaterally, the quasi-alliance has been shaped by the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation (JDSC). Nonetheless, close security ties were temporarily adrift over Australia’s submarine deal and realigned by tangible milestones, such as the Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) and the new JDSC signed off in 2022. While investigating these footsteps of the quasi-alliance formation, this article considers whether both countries have moved beyond the quasi-alliance toward a full military alliance in the changing strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific region.*

## Introduction

Australia and Japan developed a “special strategic partnership” during the administrations of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Tony Abbot (MOFA, 2014). Globally, both countries formed a special strategic partnership in the middle of a global power transition and geopolitical rivalry between China as a challenger and the United States as the hegemonic power (Walton and Kavalski, 2017). Although the Japan-Australia relationship is “multifaceted” with a variety of common interests, including new cooperation for climate change (Walton, 2022a), most researchers of Japan-Australia relations have focused on whether the bilateral relationship would evolve from a “special strategic partnership” or the “quasi-alliance” to a formal “alliance” (Akimoto, 2022a). In other words, will Tokyo and Canberra consider an upgrade of the “quasi-alliance” to a formal military alliance? Since Abe was a major contributor to the formation and development of the special strategic partnership (Wilkins, 2022b), this article sheds light on the period from 2012 to the present, including the second Abe administration and the post-Abe period. In particular, it contextualises the development of the Japan-Australia “special strategic partnership” development by examining main global, regional, and bilateral political events.

From a global perspective, it is essential to note that since 2012, both countries have been faced with a transition of global power in the age of Indo-Pacific geopolitics. As key US allies, Tokyo and Canberra have taken policies to counterbalance a rising China, although China is an indispensable trade partner for both countries. As an example of this dilemma, Tokyo and Canberra support the Indo-Pacific strategy facilitated by the United States, but at the same time, both countries need to deal with the influence of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) promoted by Beijing (Akimoto, 2021). In this respect, it can be viewed that both Japan and Australia would like to strengthen the quasi-alliance but also need to determine how to side-step a possible hegemonic war between China and the United States.

From a regional perspective, both Japan and Australia have contributed to the formation of the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD) and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) policy, and hence, it is necessary for the Quad countries, especially Japan and Australia, to avoid and mitigate a traditional security dilemma with China. From a bilateral perspective, both Japan and Australia have strengthened their security alignment to the extent that it could be regarded as a so-called “quasi-alliance”, albeit not a formal military alliance. In this sense, it is meaningful to contextualise the development of the quasi-alliance based on the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation (JDSC), first announced on 13 March 2007 and upgraded on 22 October 2022.

To what extent do Tokyo and Canberra share common strategic viewpoints on China amid the geopolitical rivalry between China and the United States? How has the Japan-Australia quasi-alliance been adrift and realigned by several events, such as Australia’s submarine deal and the upgrade of the JDSC? In the middle of the global power transition, will Japan and Australia move beyond the quasi-alliance? In order to answer these research questions, this article tracks the footsteps of the bilateral special strategic partnership and applies a framework of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis to examine the possibilities and limitations of a formal Japan-Australia military alliance in the Indo-Pacific geopolitics.

### **Japan and Australia in the Global Power Transition**

In the middle of the power transition period, former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe set forth strategic visions for Japanese diplomacy, including “diplomacy taking a panoramic perspective of the world” and a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) (Yoshimatsu, 2021). As pointed out by some scholars, including Tetsuo Kotani, a professor at Meikai University, Abe’s FOIP vision was adopted by the administration of former President Donald Trump as Washington’s Indo-Pacific strategy vis-à-vis China’s BRI (Kotani, 2021: 61). From a realist perspective, John Mearsheimer pointed out that “if China continues its impressive economic growth over the next few decades, the US and China are likely to engage in an intense security competition with considerable potential for war” (Mearsheimer, 2005). Moreover, Graham Allison has warned of a possible war between China and the United States when they end up with the so-called “Thucydides trap”. Allison cited an analysis of the ancient Greek historian Thucydides, who noted, “It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable” (Allison, 2017). Allison argues that there are 16 cases in history in which a rising power threatened to rule one and that 12 of them resulted in war (Allison, 2015). It has been argued that the Thucydides trap works in Asia, where a power transition from the United States to China is observable. Therefore, Japan and Australia need to be aware of and step away from the Thucydides trap in the Indo-Pacific (Porter, 2022).

What are the strategic implications of the Thucydides trap for the Japan-Australia relationship? At a press conference after the Australia-Japan foreign ministers’ telephone conference with his counterpart Marise Payne on 9 February 2021, former Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi commented that “I believe many writers would argue that it [the Thucydides trap] does not apply at the present point” (MOFA, 2021). Motegi’s remark as a foreign minister was diplomatically

appropriate, as it intended not to cause unnecessary tension between Tokyo and Beijing. Strategically, however, the Thucydides trap cannot be overlooked when considering Japan's special strategic partnership with Australia and the Japan-US alliance.

The question is, where does the Thucydides trap exist in the Indo-Pacific region? If there is a military emergency in the Korean Peninsula, as in the Second Korean War, the Australian government would invoke the Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty (ANZUS Treaty), as confirmed by Malcolm Turnbull on 11 August 2017 (Ho, 2017). Yet, what if China dares to intervene in the military conflict over the Korean Peninsula, just like in the case of the Korean War (1950-1953)? (Vergan, 2023). If this is the case, the Thucydides trap may exist for Japan and Australia over the Korean Peninsula. If a military conflict occurs in the East China Sea, the United States might encourage Australia to defend Japan. If diplomatic tension over the Taiwan Strait is about to escalate into a military emergency, both Japan and Australia would be requested by the United States to make military contributions to the peace and stability of the Taiwan Strait (Taiwan Today, 1955; Nakada, 2024; Nikkei Asia, 2023). Still, Australia would carefully consider the applicability of the ANZUS Treaty to the imbroglios in the East China Sea or the Taiwan Strait (Bisley and Taylor, 2014). What if the regional skirmish escalates into a full-scale armed conflict between the United States and China?

Entrapments in these conflicts are nightmare scenarios and typical cases of alliance dilemmas for both Japan and Australia. Since there has been no NATO-like regional alliance in Asia, excluding the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) (Office of the Historian, Foreign Service Institute United States Department of State, 2023), both Japan and Australia have been involved in "regional security architecture" alongside with their alliances with the United States (Curtis, 2023), it used to be observed that Japan would be able to join the ANZUS Treaty in the Cold War period, forming Japan, Australia, New Zealand, United States (JANZUS) (Tow, 1978). More recently, it has been discussed that Japan should join the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) defence cooperation, turning the group into Japan-Australia-United Kingdom-United States (JAUKUS) (Auslin, 2022).

Both JANZUS and JAUKUS options could have been effective security alignments in the Indo-Pacific strategic sphere, but they are highly unlikely to be acted on at the time of writing. Hence, it is necessary to take the regional security implications of the TSD and the Quad for the bilateral strategic alignment into consideration in the following sections. Brazil, Russia, India, China, and Saudi Arabia (BRICS) increased their geopolitical influence in global politics, while Saudi Arabia had officially joined the BRICS, and the Japan-Australia security partnership would need to consider the strategic implications of BRICS for the bilateral relationship in the Indo Pacific (Japan Times, 2024).

### **Japan, Australia, and the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD)**

Japan and Australia have cooperated in the framing of the TSD with the United States. Some observers regard the TSD as a "little NATO" or "shadow alliance" against China, and it may be natural for Beijing to consider it to be a containment against the nation (Jain, 2004). Still, it is important to note that the TSD does not have a defence obligation, unlike NATO; hence, it is not a formal alliance (Satake, 2017). In essence, the TSD can be regarded as the trilateral strategic "alignment" within a framework of intra-alliance politics (Wilkins, 2007). Although its origin dates back to the trilateral counter-terrorism cooperation in the post-9/11 context (Schoff, 2015: 40), the first ministerial meeting of the TSD was held by Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso, Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on 18 March 2006 in Sydney (MOFA, 2006). Notably, the TSD initially "welcomed China's constructive engagement" in the Asia-Pacific region, indicating that this strategic alignment is not a containment against Beijing (Ibid).



Although the initial motive of the TSD was not to contain China, the TSD has been gradually incorporated into a geopolitical dilemma between the TSD and Beijing over time. On 4 October 2013, the fifth ministerial meeting of the TSD was held on the margins of the APEC ministerial meeting. Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, and Secretary of State John Kerry shared their strategic interests and mutual concerns over the East China Sea. They moreover confirmed the significance of international law, including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which was confirmed in the joint statement (MOFA, 2013). Thus, the TSD was initiated not as containment against China, but the joint statement of the fifth TSD included a diplomatic message so that Beijing should “agree on a meaningful code of conduct” opposing “coercive or unilateral actions that could change the status quo in the East China Sea” (Ibid). In addition, the joint statement of the six TSD ministerial meetings noted that “the ministers expressed their serious concerns over maritime disputes in the South China Sea” (MOFA, 2016b).

In June 2019, it was reported that Japan, Australia, and the United States would begin a liquefied natural gas (LNG) project in Papua New Guinea, which was described as a “belt and road” in the South Pacific (Kodachi, 2019). Clearly, the TSD countries intended to take concrete measures against China’s Belt and Road initiative. The ninth ministerial meeting of the TSD was held by Foreign Minister Taro Kono, Foreign Minister Marise Payne, and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in Thailand on 1 August 2019 (MOFA, 2019a). The ministers affirmed the achieve the FOIP vision and shared common concerns over the situation in the South China Sea (Ibid). In a joint statement, the three ministers also agreed to remain in communication regarding the situation of the East China Sea (MOFA, 2019b).

On 4 August 2022, Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi, Foreign Minister Penny Wong, and Secretary of State Antony Blinken held the tenth ministerial TSD meeting in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. In a joint statement, the three ministers did not mention the South China Sea or the East China Sea but reaffirmed their commitment to maintaining “peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait” (MOFA, 2022c). Thus, the TSD sent a diplomatic message to Beijing during the rising regional tension over the Taiwan Strait. As noted by Purnendra Jain, Tokyo and Canberra have faced “pressing and challenging security issues” as Indo-Pacific countries, especially the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine (Jain, 2023: 122). In this sense, it can be considered that the TSD’s focus on Taiwan was influenced by the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, which broke out on 20 February 2014 and militarily escalated on 24 February 2022, and that both Tokyo and Canberra cannot be free from a “risk of entrapment” in a possible military emergency in the Indo-Pacific region (Satake and Hemmings, 2018). Strategically, the Russia-Ukraine conflict has profound implications for the Japan-Australia relationship because the Soviet Union and Russia occupied the Northern Territories/Kurile Islands near the end of the Second World War (Mulgan, 2022). The development of the TSD evidently indicates that both Japan and Australia have been faced with the increasing political influence and maritime aggressiveness of Beijing, as well as the growing tensions over the Taiwan Strait.

### **Japan, Australia, and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)**

Like the case of the TSD, both Japan and Australia have contributed to the institutionalisation of the Quad. The Quad, as noted by Ryosuke Hanada, is not an “alliance” against China but intends to counter China’s assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region (Hanada, 2018). Having said that, it is argued that the Quad as a “minilateral security framework” could aggravate a “steep incline” into a Thucydides-type trap (Panda, 2022). Likewise, it has been observed that India was cautious about being entrapped in the Quad, and its differences with other Quad partners were exposed. Some analysts argued that the TSD, as an older and more formalised alignment, would function better than the Quad in the event of a possible military emergency (Channer, 2022), and it has been argued that India’s strategic views on China are different from Japan (Amari, 2022). Another analyst went too

far as to say that India does not need the Quad to counter China (Babones, 2020). At the same time, however, although India used to be hesitant, New Delhi changed its diplomatic attitude to the Quad, and it has become a more willing partner and strong supporter of the Quad (Jain, 2022). Either way, both Japan and Australia view India as a strategic partner in the Indo-Pacific, and therefore, it is important to consider the strategic implications of the Quad for the Japan-Australia security partnership.

The Quad member states have held meetings to discuss regional and global security issues based on shared fundamental values, such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law (MOFA, 2022d). As a background to the Quad, the four countries formed a core group to lead the international community's support after the Earthquake off the Coast of Sumatra and the Tsunami Disaster that occurred in the Indian Ocean in December 2004. The Quad was originally proposed by Shinzo Abe, and the first meeting by Quad officials took place in May 2007. Although there was a working-level meeting and a maritime exercise in 2007, the so-called Quad 1.0 during the first term of the Abe administration was not fully institutionalised for several reasons, including a China factor (Madan, 2020).

The Quad was institutionalised and developed into the so-called Quad 2.0 during the second term of the Abe administration as well as the Donald Trump administration. Specifically, Foreign Minister Taro Kono proposed to institutionalise the Quad and upgrade from the sub-cabinet level to the foreign ministerial level (Satake, 2021). As a result, director general-level meetings of the Quad have been held on a regular basis since November 2017 (Borah, 2021). The first foreign ministers' meeting of the Quad took place in New York in September 2019, and the second foreign ministers' meeting was held in Tokyo in October 2020. In March 2021, Quad's top leaders' video conference was held for the first time. In September of the year, the first in-person meeting by top leaders of the Quad took place in Washington. Notably, the Quad 2.0 includes cooperation for non-traditional security and has the potential to provide general support among Southeast Asian countries (Walton, 2022b).

Globally, the Quad was formulated in the age of the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific," where the United States and China have been competing for a regional and global hegemony (Smith, 2020). The four countries have strengthened their strategic networks in the post-coronavirus pandemic period and the middle of the Ukraine crisis. In February 2022, the Quad foreign ministerial meeting was held in Canberra, and the Quad top leaders teleconference took place the following month. In May 2022, the in-person Quad meeting of the top leaders took place in Tokyo. In July 2022, the Quad Energy meeting took place in Sydney, and the foreign ministerial meeting in New York took place in September 2022. In this context, some researchers have argued that the so-called Quad 3.0 has been emerging in the age of the Indo-Pacific (Akimoto, 2022b; Koga, 2022; Shankar, 2021).

In response to the institutionalisation of the Quad, China has been cautious and seemingly paranoid about the grouping (Mohan, 2022). At first, Beijing did not take the formation of the Quad seriously, stating that "they are like the sea foam in the Pacific or Indian Ocean: They get some attention but will soon dissipate" (Rudd, 2021). Indeed, when Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd decided on a "policy to disconnect from the Quad", the quadrilateral alignment was deactivated (Marlow, 2022). Yet, Beijing began to rethink its optimistic viewpoint on the Quad later. The Quad members had planned to cooperate to monitor illegal fishing activities by China in the Indo-Pacific region (Japan Times, 2022a). On 22 May 2022, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that the Quad had been formed "to contain China", and Beijing has regarded the Quad as "Asian NATO" (Pandey, 2022). The Quad has included quadrilateral strategic cooperation in the field of economic security as well. In a joint statement in March 2021, for instance, the four countries agreed to "launch a critical- and emerging-technology working group to facilitate cooperation on international standards and innovative technologies of the future" (Rajagopalan, 2022).

In the middle of the energy crisis caused by the Russia-Ukraine War, the Quad was faced with the necessity of quadrilateral energy security alignment as well. On the occasion of the Quad leaders meeting in Tokyo on 24 May 2022, for example, Quad leaders launched the Quad Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation Package as measures against climate change as well as energy insecurity (MOFA, 2022b). On 13 July 2022, the first-ever meeting of Quad energy ministers took place in Sydney. In the meeting, Japanese Minister of Economy, Trade, and Industry Koichi Hagiuda, Australian Minister for Climate Change and Clean Energy Chris Bowen, Indian Minister of Power and New and Renewable Energy R. K. Singh, and US Secretary of Energy Jennifer M. Granholm agreed to cooperate for enhancement of energy security and transition to clean energy toward the decarbonisation goal (US Department of Energy, 2022). Notably, Hagiuda asked Bowen and Granholm to supply more LNG to Japan in the middle of the energy crisis aggravated by the influence of the Russia-Ukraine War (Kato, 2022).

It can be argued that the Quad as a strategic alignment could raise a traditional “security dilemma” in relation to China (Hemmings, 2022) and might increase the possibilities of the occurrence of other regional conflicts in the Indo-Pacific strategic sphere. Whereas diplomatic tension over the Taiwan Strait has built up, Japan has currently attempted to acquire so-called “counterstrike capabilities”, namely enemy base strike capabilities (Japan Times, 2022b). Although policy debate in Japan has focused on enemy base strike capabilities in conjunction with missile defence systems in the event of a possible military emergency in the Korean Peninsula, the strike capabilities could also target China (Akimoto, 2020b). In this respect, Japan and Australia should be aware of growing tensions between China and the Quad member states. For this reason, both Japan and Australia are expected to figure out how to mitigate the security dilemma and avoid entrapment in a possible war between China and the United States.

### **The Quasi-Alliance Adrift: The Case of Australia’s Submarine Deal**

Although Tokyo and Canberra have beefed up their security partnership in a changing global security environment, the “quasi-alliance” resulted in a drift over Australia’s future submarine development project. Australia’s future submarine program (FSP) caused thorny tension with Japan and exemplified the bilateral relationship could be influenced by certain types of domestic and external pressure (Bergmann et al., 2016). It has been reported that the Abbot administration had originally made overtures to the Abe government to provide technology transfer of Japan’s Soryu-class submarine for the development of Australia’s next-generation submarine in 2014. In October 2014, it was reported that Defence Minister David Johnston had officially requested Tokyo to help develop a new fleet of Soryu-class submarines, although the 2009 Australia’s Defence White Paper published by the Labor government noted that the new submarines of the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) would be built by the domestic shipbuilding industry in South Australia (Turnbull, 2014). Moreover, it has to be noted that the Liberal Party also promised that Australia’s future submarines would be built in South Australia just before the 2013 federal election (ABC News, 2016). In essence, Abbott regarded Japan’s submarine as “the world’s best large conventional submarine” (Abbott, 2016) and excluded the possibility of a competitive tender process for the FSP from the outset.

Hence, Japan’s Soryu-class submarine initiated by a so-called “captain’s call” was the front-runner for the FSP (Parliament of Australia, 2021: 7). Still, there existed opposition and cautious opinions inside Australia. Greg Sheridan, for example, argued in *The Australian*: “I am now coming, reluctantly, to the view this option just presents too much risk, financially, politically and militarily. I don’t think Abbott can secure Japanese subs through a good process. Impatience with the process is one of Abbott’s weaknesses” (Dobell, 2015). On 9 February 2015, it was announced that the competitive evaluation process (CEP) would be introduced to the FSP (Kerin, 2015). In addition, the leadership change from Abbott to Malcolm Turnbull on 15 September 2015 influenced Canberra’s decision-making on the submarine deal. In the meantime, Japan was reluctantly ready to reconsider

its “made in Japan” approach to the submarine deal. Masaaki Ishikawa, Director General for Acquisition Reform at the Ministry of Defence, said in an interview with *Reuters* published on 30 September 2015 that “Whatever option Australia chooses, we are ready to provide the necessary technology transfers and skills... We will optimise the role of Australian industry” (Kelly and Kubo, 2015).

Considering the flexible stance of the Japanese side, it was observed that Australia would increasingly be likely to select Japan for the FSP (Johnson, 2016). On 26 April 2016, however, the Turnbull government announced that Canberra would select France’s Naval Group (then Direction des Constructions Navales Services: DCNS) to partner with Australia’s next generation submarine development. This “pragmatic decision” made by the Turnbull administration prioritised the economic impact of developing Australia’s future submarines in Adelaide on the redevelopment of the domestic shipbuilding industry so that it could contribute to the employment rate in the country (Tingle, 2016). To be more specific, Turnbull himself explained on that day that “This \$50 billion investment will directly sustain around 1,100 Australian jobs and a further 1,700 Australian jobs through the supply chain” (Turnbull, 2016).

On hearing the result of the CEP, Japanese Defence Minister Gen Nakatani expressed “immense disappointment” at the decision and stated that he would seek an explanation about the process (Bisley and Envall, 2016). On the other hand, Abbott, as an initiator of the submarine deal, commented, “Australia’s special relationship with Japan is more than strong enough to withstand this disappointment... I am confident that our strategic partnership will continue to grow through other means” (McDonald, 2016). Alan Dupont, an adjunct professor at the University of New South Wales, observed that Japan would digest the disappointment and the bilateral relationship would be “back to business” within a year (Ibid).

In addition to domestic considerations, a China factor may have influenced the decision-making process in Canberra. Notably, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi asserted that Canberra should not choose Japan’s submarine for the FSP out of “consideration of the feelings of Asian countries” over the Asia Pacific War (Ryall, 2016). Indeed, Japan’s Soryu-class submarine, armed with Type 89 heavyweight homing torpedoes and UGM-84 submarine-launched Harpoon missiles, is famous for its propulsion and stealth quality (Mizokami, 2017). As pointed out by Hugh White, Japan’s bid for the FSP had strategic implications, whereas German and French bids were based on commercial purposes. White raised critical questions in an article in *The Age* published on 14 March 2016, as follows: “How willing would we be, ultimately, to take Japan’s side in a war, and send our forces – including our submarines – to fight alongside them against China?”, suggesting that it would not be wise for Canberra to choose Japan’s submarines (White, 2016). Similarly, Geoff Slocombe raised questions regarding the China factor: “Given that China is Australia’s number one trading partner, what would be the impact of teaming with Japan and the US in what will be seen by China as a strategic coalition to contain their naval expansion?” (Bergmann et al., 2016). Thus, there exists a persuasive argument that if Canberra chose Japanese technology for the FSP, it would have a negative impact on its commercial relationship with China in the end.

In the Japanese defence community, there was not only disappointment at the decision but also relief by the speculation that the transfer of Japan’s submarine technology to Australia might lead to a leak of the technology to other countries, especially China, as pointed out by Tetsuo Kotani (Kotani, 2016). In addition, some observers argued that Japan’s loss to France in the competition was better than the contract cancellation afterwards. On 15 September 2021, Scott Morrison announced that Australia would nullify the contract with France and should introduce the technology of nuclear submarines from the United States and the United Kingdom based on the trilateral security partnership, namely AUKUS (Wilkins, 2021b). In hindsight, therefore, some Japanese defence policy

experts would argue that Japan's loss to France in the FSP did not deserve disappointment after all, and the bilateral relationship was realigned despite the quasi-alliance adrift over the submarine deal.

### **The Quasi-Alliance Realigned: Upgrade of the Japan-Australia JDSC**

Despite the bitter experience with the submarine deal, the Japan-Australia "quasi-alliance" rapidly recovered and developed during the second Abe administration (Satake, 2022). In retrospect, the Japanese government has recognised a status of "quasi-alliance" between Japan and Australia based on the JDSC on 13 March 2007, signed by Abe and John Howard (MOFA, 2007). Howard played a significant role in strengthening the bilateral defence ties by sending the Australian Defence Forces (ADF) to Iraq to escort the Japanese Self-Defence Forces (SDF) for post-war reconstruction activities (Howard, 2010: 458). The 2007 JDSC was signed based on bilateral peacekeeping and security cooperation (Akimoto, 2013). With regard to the JDSC, Greg Sheridan reported that "The Howard Government was keen to be as ambitious as the Japanese could accommodate and would have been happy with a formal security treaty. However, Japanese Government lawyers believed that it would be legally and politically too difficult to square such a treaty with their constitution" (Dobell, 2014). Although the JDSC is not a formal threat that requires mutual defence obligation, the bilateral strategic partnership has been "progressively institutionalised" based on the JDSC (Wilkins, 2021a: 1). Abe explained that the JDSC was not aimed to encircle China, although the bilateral security link contributes to reinforcing the US alliance system in the region (Mulgan, 2007).

Importantly, the JDSC has been a cornerstone for the development of a bilateral "quasi-alliance" because the term "quasi-alliance" began to be used after the signing of the 2007 JDSC. During the Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence at the House of Councillors on 10 April 2007, Hiroshi Takano, as a legislator of Komeito, asked Foreign Minister Taro Aso whether Japan-Australia relations could be regarded as "quasi-alliance" or not. In response, Aso replied that the bilateral relationship had reached a level of quasi-alliance (National Diet Library, 2007). Aso's answer as a foreign minister of the first term of the Abe administration to Takano's question was important because it was the first time a minister of the Japanese government recognised Japan-Australia's "quasi-alliance" during the Diet deliberation.

Diet members of opposition parties in Japan have also recognised that Japan-Australia relations could be viewed as "quasi-alliance". Shigefumi Matsuzawa of Your Party (Minnanoto) pointed out that the bilateral relationship is quasi-alliance during his question to Prime Minister Abe in deliberating on Japan's right to collective self-defence on 15 July 2014 (National Diet Library, 2014). Matsuzawa argued that Australia should be categorised as a foreign "country that is in a close relationship with Japan" as stipulated in the so-called "Three New Conditions for 'Use of Force' as Measures for Self-Defence" in the Peace and Security Legislation (MOFA, 2016a). On 1 April 2016, Akihisa Nagashima of the DPJ stated that the Abe-Abbott connection was significant and described Australia as Japan's "quasi-ally" in his question to Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida during the Committee on Foreign Affairs at the House of Representatives (National Diet Library, 2016). Evidently, there has existed a multipartisan recognition in Tokyo that Australia is Japan's quasi-ally based on the JDSC as well as accumulated security cooperation.

In Australia, it has been reported that the Japanese side had recognised the bilateral relationship as a "quasi-alliance". John Garnaut of *The Sydney Morning Herald* quoted a comment by a Japanese official: "Military ties between Australia and Japan have been growing so fast that they amount to a 'quasi-alliance'" (Garnaut, 2014). Garnaut also quoted a comment by Malcolm Cook regarding the bilateral defence ties: "The dual-tightening of Australia's alliance with the US and its defence partnership with Japan is the most important strategic decision that Australia has made in the post-Cold War era" (Ibid). In addition, *The Australian* reported on 13 October 2013 that Tony Abbott had

described Japan as Australia's "best friend in Asia" and a "strong ally" of the country (Brookes, 2014: 3).

Regarding the remark by Abbott, Chris Brookes of the Australian Defence College argued in *Indo-Pacific Strategic Papers* of 2014 that "it is not in either Australia's or Japan's interest to seek a bilateral security alliance" (Ibid: 6). Hugh White described the bilateral relationship as a "de facto strategic alliance" in *The Age* on 15 September 2014 (White, 2014). In a report on the *Indo-Pacific Strategic Papers* of 2015, Lendley Ghee of the Australian Defence College reconfirmed that the bilateral relationship is not an alliance but a quasi-alliance (Ghee, 2015). In accordance with Japan's Peace and Security Legislation, the revised Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) was signed by Abe and Turnbull in Sydney on 14 January 2017 (Australian Government, 2017). The revised ACSA enhanced the bilateral military interoperability, strengthening the quasi-alliance system. In January 2018, H. D. P. Envall observed that "the term quasi-ally pops up every so often from Tokyo and is now widely deployed in the media" (Envall, 2018).

In the face of the uncertainty stemming from the Trump administration, Peter Jennings of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) argued in July 2018 that "Australia should conclude a defence treaty with Japan, the most consequential democratic regional power" (Jennings, 2018). Likewise, Malcolm Davis from the ASPI contended that Australia should conclude a formal military treaty with Japan, building a "trilateral defence alliance" (Davis, 2019). Davis specifically noted that "a key step at the diplomatic level must be developing a formal alliance relationship with Japan that complements and enhances both states' alliance structures with the US" (Ibid). Politically, it was reported that Defence Minister Christopher Pyne described Japan as a "quasi-ally" of Australia when he had a meeting with his counterpart, Defence Minister Takeshi Iwaya, in Tokyo on 23 January 2019 (WING, 2019). During an interview with the author, former Ambassador Bruce Miller described the Japan-Australia "quasi-alliance" as "action before words" (*fugen jikko*) (Akimoto, 2019). In other words, although Tokyo and Canberra have not explicitly used the term "quasi-alliance" in an official document, both countries have already recognised quasi-alliance and behaved as quasi-allies.

On 19 October 2020, a joint statement on security cooperation was issued by Defence Ministers Nobuo Kishi and Linda Reynolds, who expressed "strong opposition to any destabilising or coercive unilateral actions that could alter the status quo and increase tensions" in the Indo-Pacific region (Thakur, 2020). On 17 November of the year, Prime Minister Scott Morrison visited Tokyo and had a summit meeting with Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga. It was Morrison's first overseas trip during the COVID-19 pandemic, and he became the first international leader to have a summit meeting with Suga during the pandemic period (Ibid). Regarding upgrading the bilateral security ties, Ramesh Thakur commented that Japan and Australia would "edge toward an alliance" in *The Japan Times* (Ibid).

From 10-12 November 2021, Japan's Maritime Self-Defence Force (MSDF) JS Inazuma conducted a joint exercise with Australia's RAN Frigate HMAS Warramunga in the waters off south of Shikoku. The exercise is called Nichi-Go Trident, and Inazuma carried out asset protection for Warramunga based on Article 95-2 of the SDF Law as part of the Peace and Security Legislation (MOD, 2021). The application of the legislation for the ADF was of significance given the opposition during the Diet deliberation in the enactment process (Akimoto, 2018). The Nichi-Go Trident exercise best exemplified the strategic coordination and alignment based on the Japan-Australia quasi-alliance for maritime peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

On 6 January 2022, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and Prime Minister Scott Morrison signed off the Japan-Australia Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) (MOFA, 2022a). The Japan-Australia RAA intends to facilitate reciprocal access and cooperation between the SDF and the ADF. The Japan-

Australia RAA is an equivalent of the Japan-US Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), or the “Agreement regarding the Status of United States Armed Forces in Japan” (MOFA, 1960). The signing of the RAA was, therefore, of significance because it signifies the substantial upgrade of the bilateral security alignment. Some media erroneously described the RAA as a “defence pact” or “military alliance”, but it is not a formal military alliance (Wilkins, 2022a). Although it is not a formal alliance, Tokyo had already regarded Canberra as a “semi-ally”, and the special strategic partnership would already constitute a “virtual alliance” in the context of the mutual alliances with the United States (Dominguez, 2022).

Importantly, the JDSC was upgraded by Prime Ministers Kishida and Anthony Albanese in Perth on 22 October 2022. The new JDSC reaffirmed the “special strategic partnership” and the significance of the FOIP vision (DFAT, 2022). Graeme Dobell of the ASPI contended that the quasi-alliance between Canberra and Tokyo became “less quasi and more alliance” given the similarity between Article 6 of the ANZUS Treaty and Article 6 of the new JDSC (Dobell, 2022). Although there is no mention of “China” in the text of the joint declaration, a “joint statement” announced at a summit meeting included the term “Taiwan”, signifying the significance of security cooperation in the event of a possible Taiwan emergency (Walton and Akimoto, 2022). Notably, Michael Green, Chief Executive Officer of the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney, pointed out that upgrading the JDSC might be regarded as a stepping stone toward a full-fledged bilateral military alliance (Ibid). In addition, it is fair to argue that the bilateral defence upgrade was also facilitated by the rise of China as well as the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine War on 24 February 2022 (Akimoto, 2022a). In short, both Tokyo and Canberra were forced to realign the quasi-alliance in the face of the increasingly severe strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific. However, there are regulatory barriers to the further development of bilateral strategic collaboration (Satake, 2023).

### **SWOT Analysis on the Formation of the Japan-Australia Alliance**

Considering the footsteps and development of the Japan-Australia quasi-alliance, this section intends to conduct a so-called SWOT analysis in order to examine the feasibility of forming a formal bilateral military alliance. The SWOT analysis or SWOT matrix is frequently used to identify strengths (internal), weaknesses (internal), opportunities (external), and threats (external) in the process of strategic planning or project planning, and it can be applicable to the field of international security too (Blaxland, 2019).

The SWOT analysis was applied by some researchers in Ukraine to investigate the strategic cooperation between Ukraine and NATO and clarify the necessary criteria for Ukraine’s entry into NATO prior to the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine War (Bratko et al., 2021). Thus, it can be fair to argue that a SWOT analysis is a useful analytical approach to the examination of alliance formation. Accordingly, a SWOT analysis can be applicable to the feasibility assessment of forming a Japan-Australia alliance, as shown in the Table below.

Table: A SWOT Analysis on the Formation of a Japan-Australia Alliance

<b>a) Strengths / Merits</b>	<b>b) Weaknesses / Limitations</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reinforce the mutual alliances with the US vis-à-vis China (balance of power)</li> <li>• Prepare for possible emergencies (Taiwan Strait, East and South China Seas, etc.)</li> <li>• Risk hedge (fear of abandonment)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The threat perception gap between Tokyo and Canberra (imbalance of threat)</li> <li>• Limitations of the SDF due to Article 9</li> <li>• The existence of the Japan-US Security Treaty and the ANZUS is regarded as sufficient</li> </ul>
<b>c) Opportunities / Spillovers</b>	<b>d) Threats / Demerits</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The TSD could be upgraded into a formal trilateral military alliance</li> <li>• The Quad would be strengthened as well</li> <li>• It may facilitate the formation of a regional defence architecture in the Indo-Pacific</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economic ties with China may be affected</li> <li>• Security dilemma with China</li> <li>• Thucydides trap as possible military emergencies, including the Second Korean War (fear of entrapment)</li> </ul>

#### a) *Strengths in Japan-Australia Alliance Formation*

First, the strengths (or merits) of the Japan-Australia military alliance are 1) reinforcement of the mutual alliances with the United States while preparing for possible regional military emergencies, including the Taiwan Strait, and 2) balance of power as well as hedge against fear of abandonment in the US-centred alliance system. Globally, the hegemonic competition between the United States and China, as well as the ongoing Russia-China War, can be perceived as facilitative factors to the formation of the Japan-Australia military alliance. Regionally, China's maritime expansionism in the Indo-Pacific and Japan's fear of abandonment in a possible conflict in the East China Sea could be facilitative factors. Bilaterally, the RAA and the new JDSC can be regarded as footsteps toward the formal bilateral alliance, while both countries would need to pay attention to the possibilities of "fear of abandonment". As was the case with the Trump administration, it would be possible that a future US administration would take unexpected diplomatic actions, suggesting pulling out the US forces from the allies. Such a possibility would make Tokyo and Canberra reconsider the necessity of forming a formal military alliance as a risk hedge. Nationally, the enactment of Japan's Peace and Security Legislation can be regarded as a critical step toward its military normalisation, which enables Japan to exercise the right to collective self-defence to protect Australia. However, the Peace and Security Legislation would not function well without the proper military support from the United States. It is possible for potential enemies of Tokyo to conduct decoupling diplomacy vis-à-vis the Japan-US military alliance by nuclear blackmail, etc. In the middle of geopolitical uncertainties, Tokyo and Canberra might recognise the necessity of upgrading the bilateral quasi-alliance into a full-fledged military alliance.

#### b) *Weaknesses in the formation of the Japan-Australia military alliance*

Second, weaknesses (or limitations) of the alliance are 1) Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution and constitutional limitations of the SDF, 2) a threat perception gap over China between Tokyo and Canberra, and 3) the existence of mutual alliances with the United States. In essence, the Japan-Australia military alliance would contribute to the balance of power between the US-led alliances



and the rising Chinese military power, but as Stephen Walt pointed out, the balance of threat is another key factor to the formation of an alliance (Walt, 1987). In this respect, whereas Japan has been continuously threatened by missile launches by North Korea and challenged by the maritime expansionism of China, Australia has not received direct military threats, unlike the case of Japan. Therefore, the “imbalance of threat” both countries have recognised signifies limitations in the formation of a bilateral alliance. Fundamentally, it might sound paradoxical, but the existence of the mutual alliance with the United States can be recognised as a fundamental hindrance to the necessity of the bilateral formal alliance between Japan and Australia. In other words, the existing military alliance ironically makes the bilateral alliance unnecessary. In this respect, there are few incentives for decision-makers in Tokyo, Canberra, and Washington to encourage the formation of the bilateral military alliance.

### *c) Opportunities in the Japan-Australia Alliance Formation*

Third, opportunities (or spillovers) of the bilateral alliance are thought to be spillovers, such as 1) upgrade of the TSD as a trilateral alliance and the Quad as a more formal security alignment, and 2) possible formation of regional defence architecture. As discussed in this article, the TSD could be more effective and functional than the Quad in the event of a possible military conflict in the Indo-Pacific region. Given the fact that the ANZUS might not necessarily be invoked in possible military conflicts in the region owing to the decision by New Zealand, the formation of the trilateral military alliance among Japan, Australia, and the United States would be more realistic, which tackles regional conflict resolutions. Like the case of New Zealand, India might keep its distance from involvement in possible armed conflict in the region, and the upgrade of the TSD, rather than that of the Quad, is considered a realistic spillover by the formation of the Japan-Australia military alliance. Having said that, the formation of the Japan-Australia military alliance would enhance not only the functionality of the TSD but also that of the QUAD in the field of regional peace and security. Such a scenario would accelerate the formulation of a defence architecture in the Indo-Pacific region, where there is no NATO-type military mechanism.

### *d) Threats in the Japan-Australia Alliance Formation*

Fourth, threats (or demerits) of the bilateral alliance are 1) weakening economic ties with China and 2) security dilemma and fear of entrapment in the possible hegemonic war. In the case of the formation of the Japan-Australia military alliance, it might be true that there is no urgent necessity for both countries to upgrade the quasi-alliance into a formal military alliance because there exists no imminent and direct military threats to both countries at this stage. Likewise, it is difficult to argue that the merits of the formation of the Japan-Australia military alliance outweigh the demerits of the alliance formation. Globally, a possible hegemonic war is a nightmare scenario for both Tokyo and Canberra. Regionally, the Australians have feared a possible entrapment risk in the Taiwan Strait, although the Turnbull administration previously promised the applicability of the ANZUS Treaty to the case of a possible military emergency in the Korean Peninsula.

Suppose a military emergency in the Indo-Pacific drastically changes the geopolitical situation, such as a survival-threatening situation including nuclear blackmail, and damages the national interests of Tokyo and Canberra. In that case, both countries might swiftly consider the conclusion of the bilateral alliance. Such scenario cases, like the Second Korean War, an armed conflict in the East China Sea, or the Taiwan emergency, would drag Tokyo and Canberra into military conflicts. In these cases, Japan might abandon the peace clause, seek to form a military alliance with Australia and eventually pursue military independence from the United States. Otherwise, albeit crystal-gazing is difficult, the Japan-Australia relationship would remain the quasi-alliance, namely a special strategic partnership, in the foreseeable future.

## Conclusion

This article has examined the development of the Japan-Australia special strategic partnership by shedding light on bilateral security ties. Globally and regionally, both countries have contributed to establishing and institutionalising trilateral and quadrilateral regional security frameworks. Strategically, Tokyo and Canberra have also been confronted by China's increasing political assertiveness and maritime unilateralism. As key US allies, both countries have advocated and supported Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy vis-à-vis Beijing's BRI in recent years. At the same time, however, both countries have been aware of the "entrapment risk" of a possible war between the United States and China, hypothetically stemming from the so-called Thucydides trap, especially over the Korean Peninsula, the East and South China Seas, and the Taiwan Strait.

Related to the bilateral relationship with Beijing, this research has clarified that the Japan-Australia relationship has been influenced by China's challenge to US hegemonic status in the Indo-Pacific. Japan's bid for Australia's future submarine development project was affected by the leadership change in Australia, the economic factor in the shipbuilding industry, and Australia's national interests in relation to trade partnership with Beijing. In a sense, it is possible to argue that Japan as a "nuclear-bombed" and "nuclear-threatened" state, and Australia has somewhat different threat perceptions in regard to China and North Korea's nuclear weapons due to geographical and strategic vulnerabilities (Akimoto, 2020a). Still, this does not mean that Tokyo perceives Beijing as an immediate military threat, and Japan has managed to maintain diplomatic ties and enjoys a healthy trading relationship with China. In addition, Canberra is thought to be reluctant to jeopardise its economic and trade partnership with Beijing in the global power transition period. Although the Japan-Australia quasi-alliance resulted in adrift over the submarine deal, it was reconfirmed that Japan had recovered from the disappointment in the result and signed the RAA and upgraded the JDSC, realigning the quasi-alliance with Australia.

Moreover, the creation of the Peace and Security Legislation during the Abe government enables the SDF to protect the ADF in peacetime, grey-zone situations, and military emergencies. For instance, the Nichi-Go Trident of November 2021 best exemplified the realignment of the Japan-Australia quasi-alliance at an operational level, although the SDF is still not formal "military forces" according to the official interpretation of Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution. Moreover, the SDF would be able to exercise the right to collective self-defence for the ADF in the event of a so-called "survival-threatening situation". Both countries upgraded the JDSC in October 2022 based on the political and strategic alignments. Despite all these bilateral strategic alignments, Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution and the China factor for Canberra have been and will remain major hindrances to a formal security treaty between the two nations. Paradoxically, moreover, the existence of mutual alliances with the United States can be regarded as another inhibitive factor to the formation of the Japan-Australia military alliance. The application of the SWOT analysis furthermore indicates that the formation of the formal Japan-Australia military alliance is not achievable due to weaknesses, limitations, threats, and demerits as prohibitive factors. Having said that, the Japan-Australia special strategic partnership will be effectively functional in the event of a possible military emergency in the Indo-Pacific region, and at the same time, both countries, in conjunction with the United States, are expected to avoid any possible military clashes in the age of the power transition in Indo-Pacific geopolitics.

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