

Right now, we don't need an alliance with Japan

Hugh White

The Age

11 December 2012

P. 11

People in Canberra and Tokyo are starting to talk about a formal defence alliance between Australia and Japan in the not-too-distant future. Expectations are already being raised, not just in Tokyo but in Washington and Beijing as well. And yet there has been no serious discussion in Australia, either in public or (one suspects) in government, about whether this is a good idea.

Already our defence links with Japan have quietly grown a lot over the past few years. There are two reasons to take this seriously.

The first is that the Japanese signed up to it. They are usually obsessive about anything that hints of defence engagement beyond their alliance with the US. This is probably the most forthright statement of common strategic purpose that Japan has made with any country except America since World War II. So, for Japan it is a big deal.

The second is the regional strategic context. At a time when Japan's relations with both China and South Korea are strained by serious disputes, this seems to put Australia on Japan's side against two countries of importance to us. So, we have waded into pretty deep water here.

This is not all the Gillard government's doing. John Howard pushed closer defence links with Japan, and even floated the idea of a full-scale alliance treaty. One can see why. Australia and Japan have a lot in common, and Japan is still Asia's second richest and most powerful country, so it is clearly a friend worth having.

But this is not the whole story. Ask yourself why Tokyo is so interested in a closer relationship with Australia? The answer of course is China. Japan is very worried indeed about China's growing power, and about the US's willingness to stand up for them against Beijing. So, Tokyo seeks a regional coalition against China, and we are the first cab off the rank. Whatever Canberra may say, for Tokyo, a closer defence relationship with Australia is all about lining us up to support Japan against China.

This is a very good reason to push the pause button on the alliance with Japan. But even in its own terms we need to ask searching questions about what a closer defence relationship with Japan would really deliver to Australia, and what it would cost.

Like others, I find the idea of access to Japan's submarine expertise appealing. But we must balance such attractions against the risks of relying for such a critical capability on a country that is, for better or worse, deeply engaged in the strategic affairs of our own region and whose future policies are inevitably, at a time of great strategic flux, unclear.

A strategic alliance is an agreement between states to go to war in support of one another, so there are two questions we need to ask ourselves. Under what circumstances would we go to war to support Japan? Under what circumstances would they go to war to support us?

It would be naive to regard these questions as solely hypothetical. Since the 2+2 talks in Sydney, Japan and China have been drawn into an acrimonious dispute over the Senkaku/Daiyou Islands that carries a modest but very real risk of an armed clash which could escalate into war. If we were Japan's ally, would we go to war with China to support them over the Senkakus? Of course not. In anything like today's strategic circumstances, our interests and Japan's are not closely enough aligned to make an alliance workable.

In any future conflict with Indonesia over West Papua - again not entirely improbable - is there any reason to expect that Japan would come to our aid at the expense of its relationship with Indonesia? The answer again is clear. The fact is that for all our close alignment of values and outlook, Australia and Japan have rather different strategic interests because our strategic geography is different. And when alliances are tested, it's interests that count, not values.

This is not to say that one day, in different circumstances, an alliance with Japan might not make sense for Australia. If the US withdraws from Asia, and we face a China intent on regional hegemony, then alliance with Japan might be one of the options open to us. But until that happens we should give top priority to building a policy aimed at avoiding such a predicament. An alliance with Tokyo has no place in such a policy.

Hugh White is professor of strategic studies at ANU and a visiting fellow at the Lowy Institute. His policy paper on this issue is published today by ANU's Strategic and Defence Studies Centre.