

# POLICY BRIEF

March 22, 2022

Dr Thomas S. Wilkins is currently a Senior Fellow at the Japan Institute for International Affairs in Tokyo. He is normally based as a Senior Lecturer in International Security at the University of Sydney, Australia. He specializes in security issues in the Asia Pacific region and has published on this subject in journals such as *Review of International Studies*, *International Relations of the Asia Pacific* and the *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, among others.

---

*Disclaimer :*

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of The Japan Institute of International Affairs or any other organization with which the author is affiliated.

## Australia-Japan relations 80 years after the bombing of Darwin: A case study of reconciliation and partnership

*Dr Thomas S. Wilkins<sup>1</sup>*

### *Darwin 1942: The darkest days of Australia-Japan relations*

Eighty years ago, Japanese warplanes from Vice-Admiral Nagumo Chūichi's 1<sup>st</sup> Carrier Air Fleet launched the first of a series of air raids on Australia's northernmost capital city of Darwin.<sup>2</sup> This marked the arrival of Japan's "southern thrust" through South East Asia on Australian shores and precipitated fears that the country itself would be subjected to an invasion.<sup>3</sup> In the event, Japanese planners had already discarded such an operation as impracticable, and the subsequent naval battles of the Coral Sea (4-8 May 1942) and Midway (4-7 June 1942) would remove such a prospect for good. Australians and Japanese would continue to fight many bloody battles in the Pacific, especially in Papua New Guinea (the Kokoda Track), until Japan's ultimate surrender on 15 August 1945.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, once bitter foes, Australia and Japan are now the firmest of friends, with their relationship now described as a "Special Strategic Partnership" - their diplomacy and security policies firmly aligned towards a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), their economies entwined through the Japan-Australia Economic Partnership Agreement (JAEPA), and their peoples united in amity and cultural understanding. According to a report by the Australia-Japan Research Centre at the Australian National University: 'adversaries in the

---

1 The author wishes to acknowledge an intellectual debt to Australia's foremost chronicler of the historical relationship between Australia and Japan, Professor Neville Meaney, a distinguished scholar whom the author was privileged to meet before his passing in 2021.

2 Grose, Peter. *Awkward truth: The bombing of Darwin, February 1942.* NSW: Allen & Unwin 2011.

3 Wigmore, Lionel. *The Japanese Thrust - Australia in the War of 1939-1945.* Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1957.

4 Ham, Paul. *Kokoda*, London: Harper Collins, 2004.

Pacific War, the commitment to engagement after the war and far-sighted strategic leadership in both countries has led to a pivotal relationship of trust, closeness and shared destiny.<sup>5</sup> It is widely recognised that ‘Australia’s relationship with Japan has never been more close’.<sup>6</sup>

How this transformation occurred is a remarkable story, but one not well known either in Australia or Japan. Eighty years on from the pivotal battles of the Pacific War, it is worth recounting this successful case study of historical reconciliation to measure just how far the relationship has come since the dark days of 1942 and appraise the positive and forward-looking state of bilateral cooperation as it stands in 2022. In the process this *Policy Brief* will alert the reader to Australian perspectives on historical memory and remembrance of its war with Japan and illustrate what can be achieved through the sustained political will of politicians and peoples to overcome a fraught past. It is thus worthy of recounting in narrative as well as analytical detail. This issue is especially important as Japan struggles to achieve consensus with its Korean and Chinese neighbours over matters of the historical record.

### ***Australia and Japan come into contact and conflict***

Australia and Japan had scant contact prior to the Meiji revolution in 1868. Nevertheless, they have been “allies” of a kind in the past. As both nations entered the twentieth century, they participated as part of the “Eight Nation Alliance” (*Hachi-kakoku rengō-gun*) of powers (including Britain, the United States, India,

Germany, France, Austria-Hungary, and Italy) that suppressed the 1899-1901 Boxer Rebellion in China (*Giwadan no ran*). In 1902 Britain and Japan entered the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, committing newly-federated Australia as part of the British Empire to the agreement. ‘As a consequence of Britain’s alliance with Japan in 1902, Australia also became Japan’s ally’, according to Meaney.<sup>7</sup> Shortly after federation, Australia implemented racial exclusion policies, enunciating the “White Australia” policy (*Hakugō-shugi*), which would strain relations with Japan as much as it did with China, and which left lingering negative perceptions of Australia well after the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901 was officially repealed in 1973.

Yet, as Japan achieved its stunning victory over the Tsarist Empire in the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War, the Commonwealth of Australia became increasingly uneasy over Meiji Japan’s rise to power and its potential regional ambitions in the Pacific.<sup>8</sup> Such fears remained sublimated within the Alliance however, and Australia found itself as a co-combatant in World War I against the Central Powers, with the Japanese battlecruiser *Ibuki* famously escorting Australian troops to the Middle East, from which they would go on to fight the infamous Gallipoli Campaign in 1915 (and their parallel interventions in the Russian Far East from 1917-22). Regrettably, Australian Prime Minister Billy Hughes would block the “Racial Equality” clause proposed by Japan during the post-war settlement at Versailles in 1919, causing bitter resentment among Japanese diplomats.

The dissolution of the Anglo-Japanese

5 Armstrong, Shiro. *Reimagining the Japan Relationship: An Agenda for Australia’s Benchmark Partnership in Asia*. Australia–Japan Research Centre, The Australian National University, Canberra, 2021, p. 4.

6 Armstrong, Shiro. *Reimagining the Japan Relationship: An Agenda for Australia’s Benchmark Partnership in Asia*. Australia–Japan Research Centre, The Australian National University, Canberra, 2021, p. i.

7 Meaney, Neville K. *Towards a New Vision: Australia and Japan through 100 Years*. East Roseville, NSW: Kangaroo Press, 1999, p. 63.

8 Meaney, Neville K. *The Search for Security in the Pacific, 1901-14, A History of Australian Defence and Foreign Policy, 1901-23* Volume 1. Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2009.

Alliance in 1922 heightened Australian perceptions of national vulnerability during the inter-war period. As Japan began its program of expansion into Manchuria and eventually war with China, Australia prepared itself for a potential conflict as part of the British Empire in the Asia-Pacific. That conflict came in 1941, when Japan opened its offensive with strikes against Pearl Harbor and British colonies in Malaya and Hong Kong. Australian forces were rushed to fight in the ill-fated Malayan Campaign and surrendered in large numbers after the fall of Singapore in February 1942.<sup>9</sup> Australian soldiers that had capitulated in South East Asia were interned for the duration of the war, many in Singapore's notorious Changi Prison, with others forced to labour on the Thai-Burma railway.<sup>10</sup> The extreme treatment they experienced was to become a major source of bitterness towards Japan for long after the war had ended. In contrast, Japanese military personnel interned in Australia, chiefly in Cowra in New South Wales, staged a doomed escape attempt in August 1944, which led to the deaths of 231 prisoners and 4 Australian guards.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, Australian troops in the field continued to fight in desperate conditions along the Kokoda Track in Papua New Guinea and other operations as part of American General Macarthur's South West Pacific Area Command.<sup>12</sup>

When the war ended after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, an Australian judge, Sir William Webb,

was named President of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (1946-49), and Australian troops played a major role in the British Commonwealth Occupation Force (BCOF) stationed in Western Honshu and Kyushu and headquartered in Kure.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Restoring ties during the Cold War***

In the bitter aftermath of the Pacific War, Australian perceptions were inimical towards Japan. Especially as accounts of the deprivations of Japanese prisoner of war camps became popularised through eyewitness accounts such as Russell Braddon's *The Naked Island* (referring to the Battle of Singapore) among others.<sup>14</sup> One caveat to this national feeling, however, was the return of BCOF soldiers who had been occupying Japan, accompanied by their Japanese brides, which, though controversial at the time, sowed the seeds of cultural understanding and revealed cracks in the heretofore exclusionary White Australia policy.

On the geopolitical plane, Australia was only persuaded to rescind its calls for a harsh peace settlement in San Francisco in 1951 through American security guarantees in the form of the ANZUS alliance. Notably, for Canberra, the danger from which ANZUS was to provide protection was a theoretically resurgent and militarist Japan. In the event, as Japan's democratic state took hold these fears ebbed away as the threat from Chinese-led Communism rose to the fore by the 1950s.

9 Thompson, Peter. *The battle for Singapore: The true story of the greatest catastrophe of World War II*. London: Hachette, 2010.

10 Daws, Gavan. *Prisoners of the Japanese: POWs of World War II in the Pacific*. New York: William Morrow & Co. 1994.

11 Bullard, Steven, and Keiko Tamura. *Blankets on the wire: The Cowra breakout and its aftermath*. Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 2006.

12 Collie, Craig, and Hajime Marutani. *The path of infinite sorrow: the Japanese on the Kokoda Track*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin 2012.

13 Gerster, Robin. *Travels in Atomic Sunshine: Australia and the Occupation of Japan*. Melbourne: Scribe Publications, 2008.

14 Braddon, Russell. *The Naked Island*. Edinburgh: Birlinn, 1951.

Paradoxically, Australia and Japan found themselves as joint allies (technically “quasi-allies” to employ Cha’s term) of the United States confronting Communism in Asia throughout the proceeding Cold War.<sup>15</sup>

A breakthrough in bilateral ties occurred with the 1957 Commerce Agreement, as Japan’s process of post-war economic reconstruction gathered pace and Australia’s economic ties to the British motherland began their descent.<sup>16</sup> Sheridan records: ‘Coming so soon after the brutalities of World War II, this treaty was a matter of some controversy in Australia.’<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, Prime Minister Robert Menzies was adamant, declaring “Hostility to Japan must go. It is better to hope than always to remember.” In the same year PM Kishi Nobusuke visited the War Memorial in Canberra to lay a wreath, a highly symbolic event that marked the beginnings of tentative but steady reconciliation with the past.

In the 1950s the Fujita Salvage Company was appointed to assist in recovering ships sunk in Darwin Harbour in 1942. Supported by Japanese Ambassador to Australia Narita Katsushiro, Mr Fujita Ryugo was determined to play his own part as a private citizen towards peace and reconciliation. To this end he forged 77 bronze crosses for the Darwin Memorial United Church from the internal metalwork of

the shipwreck of the SS *Zealandia*. Additionally, the United Church in Kyoto further donated a pulpit for the new church. At the opening service of the Darwin church in 1960 Ambassador Narita declared, “Now, half a generation later, I greet with pleasure the establishment of friendly relations between Australia and Japan.”<sup>18</sup> David Thiem, Chaplain of the Royal Australian Navy Reserves, comments that ‘The actions of Mr Fujita and Mr Narita in actively seeking to rebuild peace and goodwill between Japan and Australia offer a different perspective on the horrors of the bombing of Darwin in 1942’.<sup>19</sup> Such gestures, and many more, were crucial to restoring ties at a people-to-people level.

During the Cold War Australia and Japan maintained “cordial but distant” relations, with interaction largely confined to the economic sphere. By the 1970s, at the latest, Australian trade with Japan had surpassed that with Britain, and Australian raw materials served to fuel the Japanese “economic miracle”. Togo records that ‘Australia has played a vital role in post-war Japanese economic development.’<sup>20</sup> Another breakthrough came in 1976 with the Basic Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation between Australia and Japan (or “NARA Treaty”: Nippon-Australia Relations Agreement), which affirmed that ‘The basis of relations between Australia and Japan shall be enduring peace and friendship between the two countries and

15 Cha, Victor D. *Alignment despite antagonism: the United States-Korea-Japan security triangle*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.

16 Appendix 3 - *Agreement on Commerce between Australia and Japan*, A. J. Arthur, Commonwealth Government Printer, Canberra, 1957. [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/Foreign\\_Affairs\\_Defence\\_and\\_Trade/Completed\\_inquiries/1999-02/japan/report/e03](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Foreign_Affairs_Defence_and_Trade/Completed_inquiries/1999-02/japan/report/e03)

17 Sheridan, Greg. “Australia’s Pragmatic Approach to Asian Regionalism,” in *Asia’s New Multilateralism: Cooperation, Competition, and the Search for Community*, ed. Michael J. Green and Bates Gill, New York: Columbia University Press, 2009, pp. 157-158.

18 Quoted in Thiem David. ‘75 Years After the Bombing of Darwin a Story of Reconciliation Hope and Peace’ *Semaphore* Issue 4, 2017. <https://www.navy.gov.au/media-room/publications/semaphore-04-17>

19 Thiem David. ‘75 Years After the Bombing of Darwin a Story of Reconciliation Hope and Peace’ *Semaphore* Issue 4, 2017. <https://www.navy.gov.au/media-room/publications/semaphore-04-17>

20 Togo, Kazuhiko. *Japan’s foreign policy, 1945-2009: The quest for a proactive policy*. Brill, 2010. p. 224.

their peoples’.<sup>21</sup> Though it is a rather dry and legalistic document by the standards of the effusive rhetoric used toward one another by Canberra and Tokyo today, this might perhaps be compared to the “normalisation” treaties with South Korea (1965) and the People’s Republic of China (1978), as it effectively marked a closure of the post-war period (like the 1975 Helsinki Final Act in Europe).

Meanwhile, as a result of its phenomenal economic status, a wave of “*Japonisme*” sparked public interest in Japan via best-selling novels such as *Shogun* (1975) by Australian author James Clavell.<sup>22</sup> Japanese language studies in Australia peaked. Balancing this out however were the release of the *War Diaries of Weary Dunlop* (1986), charting his experience on the Thai-Burma railway during the war.<sup>23</sup> The tragic events at Cowra were commemorated with the creation of a Japanese Garden and Cultural Centre, which opened in 1979 and now serves as a site of remembrance and school visits by Japanese exchange students from Sydney. As Meaney attests, ‘Today Cowra has become a symbol of Australian-Japanese friendship’.<sup>24</sup> Famous Australian novelist Thomas Keneally sympathetically dramatized the Cowra breakout from a Japanese point of view in *Shame and the Captives* (2015).<sup>25</sup> Japan and the Pacific War were also the subject of Australian TV series, such as the dramatization of Nevil Shute’s novel *A Town Like Alice* (1981) and *The Cowra Breakout* (1984) and films such as *Blood Oath*

(1990). Subtly, such programming revealed the Japanese perspective alongside the mainstream narrative of Australian wartime privations.

It could be argued that this contributed toward a final reckoning over shared history by confronting uncomfortable events and issues, and may have acted as some form of catharsis for bilateral relations on a people-to-people level. Australians faced up to the realities of the bitter wartime conflict, but became enthused by the Japanese economic and cultural achievements of the boom era. The first of what now amount to over 100 “sister-city” (and “sister-school” agreements) agreements between Australia and Japan began in the 1970s.<sup>26</sup> While this may all seem peripheral to high-level political and economic interaction, experience has shown that grassroots perceptions – people-to-people ties – greatly strengthen international relations and would later form one of the key supporting pillars of the Special Strategic Partnership to come. At this time, most Australian and Japanese leaders were ‘opposed to giving it [the bilateral relationship] a formal diplomatic or strategic character’.<sup>27</sup> This position was to change in the mid-2000s.

### ***The post-Cold War period: Transcending the past towards a “partnership”***

By the end of the Cold War, bilateral relations were on a firm and cordial footing, anchored in the 1957 and 1976 treaties, quasi-alignment

21 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). Basic Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation between Australia and Japan, 16 June 1976, Tokyo. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/japan/Pages/basic-treaty-of-friendship-and-co-operation-between-australia-and-japan>

22 Clavell, James, *Shogun*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1975.

23 Dunlop, Ernest Edward, and Laurens Van der Post. *The War Diaries of Weary Dunlop: Java and the Burma-Thailand Railway 1942-1945*. Australia: Penguin, 1986.

24 Meaney, Neville K. *Towards a New Vision: Australia and Japan through 100 Years*. East Roseville, NSW: Kangaroo Press, 1999, p. 97.

25 Keneally, Thomas. *Shame and the Captives: A Novel*. Simon and Schuster, 2015.

26 Australian Embassy, Tokyo, ‘Australia and Japan’s 107 sister-city/sister-state relationships’. <https://japan.embassy.gov.au/tkyo/sistercities.html>

27 Meaney, Neville K., Trevor Matthews, and Solomon Encel, *The Japanese Connection: A Survey of Australian Leaders’ Attitudes Towards Japan and the Australia-Japan Relationship* Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1988, p. 93.

through parallel alliances with the US, and flourishing economic ties. On this basis relations entered a new stage as the Cold War ended and both countries found themselves in the post-Cold War period, one of challenges and opportunities. Essentially, in this period Australia-Japan relations shifted from *economic* to *diplomatic* alignment, as Rix has documented in his volume *Australia-Japan Political Alignment: 1952 to the Present*.<sup>28</sup> At the forefront were mutual efforts to reinforce the regional architecture of the Asia-Pacific through joint championship of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum and support from the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). In tandem with this was co-deployment of Australian and Japanese personnel in peacekeeping operations in Cambodia (1993) and East Timor (1999). Progress on reconciliation also continued with the visit of Major-General Peter Phillips, President of the Australian Returned and Services League (RSL), who accepted an invitation to Japan in 2000 as a guest of the government, and visits to the country by Australian former prisoners of war (POWs) under the Japan-Australia Grassroots Exchange Programme.

In the post-Cold War period, as Japan began to revitalise its presence on the international stage through the late 90s-2000s (*kokusai kaika*), the diplomatic relationship was further buttressed, and the bilateral relationship began to be referred to as a “partnership”. A key element of this partnership from the mid-2000s onwards was the emergence of explicit bilateral *security* alignment. The Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation (JDSC) in 2007 was a watershed moment. The JDSC recognised the many junctures between their national

diplomatic and security postures and their “like-minded” political and ideological stances towards the region. It committed them to a strategic partnership ‘based on democratic values, a commitment to human rights, freedom and the rule of law, as well as shared security interests, mutual respect, trust and deep friendship’.<sup>29</sup> Henceforth, the strategic partnership would become central to joint cooperation towards regional security and was reinforced through subsequent agreements on information sharing, logistics and defence technology sharing. It also put in place an institutional structure, involving annual leadership and foreign and defence ministers (2+2) meetings, and superintended a panoply of joint military exchanges and bilateral military exercises. Though space limitations and emphasis on historical reconciliation preclude a detailed account of the institutional structure and activities set forth in the JDSC, the author has written extensively on these elsewhere (see footnotes).<sup>30</sup>

### ***The “Special Strategic Partnership” today***

Under the (second) prime ministership of Abe Shinzō the Australia-Japan relationship reached its apogee. On his multiple trips to Australia, the Japanese premier was feted by his political ally PM Tony Abbott (2013-15). At that time PM Abbott even (controversially) praised the heroism of the Japanese submariners who lost their lives in a midget submarine attack on Sydney Harbour in May 1942 and who were buried with full military honours (a memorial plaque has been installed at Georges Head).<sup>31</sup> PM Abe was invited to address the Australian Federal Parliament and began his speech in

28 Rix, Alan. *The Australia-Japan Political Alignment: 1952 to the Present*. London & New York: Routledge, 1999.

29 Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA). Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation, 13 March 2017, Tokyo. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/australia/joint0703.html>

30 Wilkins, Thomas. ‘After a decade of Strategic Partnership: Japan and Australia “decentering” from the US alliance?’, *The Pacific Review* Vol. 31, No. 4 (2018), pp. 498-514.

31 Perryman, John. ‘Japanese Midget Submarine Attack on Sydney Harbour’, <https://www.navy.gov.au/history/feature-histories/japanese-midget-submarine-attack-sydney-harbour>

the spirit of historical reconciliation by vowing that “We will never let the horrors of the past century’s history repeat themselves. This vow that Japan made after the war is still fully alive today. It will never change going forward. There is no question at all about this point.”<sup>32</sup> Acknowledging the savageries experienced at Kokoda and Sandakan, he reflected that “I can find absolutely no words to say. I can only stay humble against the evils and horrors of history.”<sup>33</sup> He further indicated Japanese appreciation for Australia’s fair-mindedness in dealing with historical issues, declaring that “We in Japan will never forget your open-minded spirit nor the past history between us”.<sup>34</sup> These sentiments received a generally positive reception in Australia, and were joined by the promulgation of the Japan-Australia Economic Partnership Agreement (JAEPA), taking bilateral commercial cooperation to a new level. Fittingly, both premiers lauded a “Special Strategic Partnership” that had been birthed on 8 July 2014.

Though PM Abbott would soon lose the premiership, and with it his influence to secure a Japanese contract for Australia’s (troubled) Future Submarine Program, the strong government support for the relationship in Australia was maintained, despite this setback. The partnership has weathered friction over whaling issues and the failed submarine bid, and has steadily expanded and deepened its

remit. Enjoying bipartisan support in Australia, the Special Strategic Partnership became a prominent fixture of both parties’ respective foreign policies from this time.

PM Abe concluded his determined effort to put the animosities of the past to rest when he made a highly symbolic visit to Darwin itself on 16 November 2018. On his visit to the Cenotaph Memorial, he stated that “As Prime Minister of Japan, I prayed for the souls of each individual who perished from the air raids conducted by the Japanese military.”<sup>35</sup> In a joint media statement with PM Morrison,

‘the two leaders acknowledged the loss and sacrifices of World War II and their determination to work tirelessly to ensure a peaceful future for the region. They highlighted the immense progress made since the war, the speed and sincerity of reconciliation between the two countries and the development of deep trust, reflected in the Special Strategic Partnership the two countries share today’.<sup>36</sup>

As analysts such as Hanada have pointed out, ‘This important symbolic step, akin to Abe’s visit to Pearl Harbor in 2016, demonstrates a rejection of nationalism in Japanese foreign policy approaches in favour of historical reconciliation.’<sup>37</sup>

32 Prime Minister of Japan and his Cabinet. ‘Remarks By Prime Minister Abe to the Australian Parliament’ 8 July 2014. [https://japan.kantei.go.jp/96\\_abe/statement/201407/0708article1.html](https://japan.kantei.go.jp/96_abe/statement/201407/0708article1.html)

33 Prime Minister of Japan and his Cabinet. ‘Remarks By Prime Minister Abe to the Australian Parliament’ 8 July 2014. [https://japan.kantei.go.jp/96\\_abe/statement/201407/0708article1.html](https://japan.kantei.go.jp/96_abe/statement/201407/0708article1.html)

34 Prime Minister of Japan and his Cabinet. ‘Remarks By Prime Minister Abe to the Australian Parliament’ 8 July 2014. [https://japan.kantei.go.jp/96\\_abe/statement/201407/0708article1.html](https://japan.kantei.go.jp/96_abe/statement/201407/0708article1.html)

35 Prime Minister of Japan and his Cabinet. ‘Salvage, Salvation to Soul Mate: Remarks by Prime Minister Abe, at the occasion of commencing the Ichthys LNG project’, 16 November 2018 Darwin, [https://japan.kantei.go.jp/98\\_abe/statement/201811/\\_00002.html](https://japan.kantei.go.jp/98_abe/statement/201811/_00002.html)

36 Prime Minister of Australia, Prime Minister of Japan, Media Release, 16 Nov 2018. <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/visit-darwin-japanese-prime-minister-shinzo-abe>

37 Hanada, Ryosuke. ‘Abe’s historic visit to Darwin a moment of truth for the rules-based order’. *The Strategist*, ASPI, 16 Nov 2018. <https://www.aspi.org.au/abes-historic-visit-to-darwin-a-moment-of-truth-for-the-rules-based-order/>

During the same visit, PM Abe and PM Scott Morrison inspected the Ichthys LNG project – a centrepiece of bilateral economic/energy cooperation. The Japanese INPEX Corporation holds a 60% share in the project, which will make a major contribution to national energy needs for several decades into the future. This indicates a strengthening and revitalisation of the long-standing economic relationship, now anchored in the bilateral EPA of 2014.

The efforts made, especially under the long tenure of PM Abe, to resolve any outstanding historical animosity towards Japan played a crucial role in achieving the high levels of trust and cooperation with Australia. Now the Special Strategic Partnership is viewed by both parties as stronger and more important than ever. Australia and Japan enjoy a deep and multi-faceted relationship that is deemed an essential tool for both governments in addressing the challenges of the Indo-Pacific Century. Their adherence to the rules-based order, enhanced economic cooperation (including supply-chain resilience and emerging technologies) and their practical cooperation in the military/defence sphere are testament to this.

At the time of writing another significant milestone has been passed through the ratification of the long-awaited Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA), which will facilitate greater military-to-military cooperation between the strategic partners. As Jennings points out, this will permit reciprocal access to one another's 'military facilities, secure port access, landing rights, logistic support, security arrangements and legal regimes'.<sup>38</sup> The possibility of Japanese Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) personnel operating in Darwin would have been utterly inconceivable in the past. Now, however, bilateral strategic

interests, aided by historical reconciliation, have surmounted any Australian sensitivities. Tillet comments that 'No doubt there will be commentary on the symbolism of Japanese military pilots flying out of Darwin, a city 80 years ago their predecessors bombed in the deadliest attack on Australian soil...Such trite thinking should last for two seconds.'<sup>39</sup> This is testament to how far the bilateral relationship has come in the intervening years.

### Conclusions

How is it that Australia-Japan relations have moved on from historical acrimony to present amity, whilst Tokyo's relations with some of its North East Asian neighbours remain mired in historical controversy? Firstly, the absence of bilateral territorial disputes or colonial legacies, as in the case of Korea and China, do not provide avenues through which historical nationalism can be channelled. Secondly, as a victorious power in the Pacific War, Australia has been able to create satisfying historical narratives to salve the national psyche and which have allowed lingering resentments to fade over the passage of time. Thirdly, Australians are willing to recognise the extraordinary transformation of Japan to a liberal democracy since 1945 and its role as a model international citizen. Fourthly, Australia and Japan, as co-US allies, share very similar strategic appraisals of the Indo-Pacific security environment and a commitment to the rules-based order.

Together the absence of significant *negative* perceptions and the presence of highly *positive* catalysts for cooperation ensure that the relationship has left the past behind as a driver of national policy and become amicable and forward-looking to a degree few would have

38 Jennings, Peter. 'Deeper Australia-Japan defence ties send strong message to China'. *The Strategist*, ASPI 5 Jan 2022. <https://www.aspi.org.au/deeper-australia-japan-defence-ties-send-strong-message-to-china/>

39 Tillet, Andrew. 'Japan joins the top ranks of Australian military allies'. *Australian Financial Review*, 5 Jan 2022. Japan joins the top ranks of Australian military allies, <https://www.afr.com/world/asia/japan-joins-the-top-ranks-of-australian-military-allies-20220105-p59lxp>



conceived possible in 1945. It is incumbent on new generations to preserve historical memory and remembrance without letting past animosities encumber a future-orientated outlook. Based upon what has been achieved through the process of historical reconciliation to date, there is strong evidence to claim that the Australia-Japan relationship has reached “maturity” in this respect.

As a report by the Australian National University’s Australia–Japan Research Centre concludes:

‘The closeness in the relationship achieved between the two countries is a product of political leadership, deep investment in it by both governments and of significant economic complementarity. Japan has become Australia’s strategic anchor in Asia, all the more remarkable an achievement given where it came from at the end of the Second World War.’<sup>40</sup>

---

40 Armstrong, Shiro. *Reimagining the Japan Relationship: An Agenda for Australia’s Benchmark Partnership in Asia*, Australia–Japan Research Centre, The Australian National University, Canberra, 2021, p. 75.