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Australia- Japan Defence Pact: Implications on the Indo-Pacific

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Australia and Japan signed a security partnership agreement at a virtual summit on Jan 6. The 'Reciprocal Access Agreement' is the first ever defence pact signed by the two even though they are US allies and station US troops on their soil.¹ Through the agreement, both countries are committed to "work together in meeting the shared strategic security challenges [they] face and to contribute to a secure and stable Indo-Pacific." Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison stated that "Our cooperation also includes an expanding agenda for the quad with India and the United States, and our shared technology-led approach to reducing carbon emissions."

The Pact facilitates defence cooperation

It is beyond the Japan-Australia Security Cooperation signed in 2007 which has institutionalised 'two+two' dialogue and closely interacting for the realisation of the Japanese vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). Economically also they are much closer; Japan is the second biggest trading partner and a big investor in Australia. Australia has recently signed another agreement –AUKUS– with the US and the United Kingdom for constructing nuclear powered attack submarines for Australia. Now US, Japan, and Australia have more institutionalised their defence partnership amid the Chinese provocation over Taiwan.

The defence pact doesn't mention any military hardware, like the AUKUS, as Japan is well ahead of Australia in the case of homemade defence systems. When Canberra invited tenders for its abandoned conventional submarine project, Tokyo had offered its 'soryu' class submarine that finally went to France. Japan in collaboration with the US is building a new fighter jet based on homemade design. The pact aims to promote joint exercises and disaster relief operations, and also enhance interoperability and cooperation of defence forces as well as simplify administrative procedures for the entry of troops into each other's countries. In September 2020 Japan and India signed a mutual access agreement that allows their militaries to access each other's bases for logistics support. However, the Japan-Australia agreement allows militaries to use each other's bases during combat operations.

The Chinese threat

Though the defence pact hasn't mentioned China, its significance at the signing was implicit. China is upping the ante on Taiwan by showing its military might through increasing air incursions into Taiwanese air space and other military activities, and even warned that any attempt to seek independence "means war". It tests the resolve of the Biden administration as to how far the US can stand up to the Chinese coercive activities in the Taiwan Strait as well in the East and South China Seas. The US is trying to bolster Taiwan's defence capabilities by providing arms and training for Taiwanese soldiers in counter-invasion tactics.²

Even as China is the largest trade partner for both Japan and Australia, at times Beijing uses this dominance in trade for strategic purposes. For instance, in 2010, Japan took custody of the captain of a Chinese fishing trawler for territorial violation near the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, China suspended exports of rare earth oxides, salts, and metals to Japan, key ingredients of the Japanese electronics industry. Similarly, when the Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison called for an independent inquiry in support of the US President Trump against China's initial mishandling of the Covid pandemic, Beijing imposed a series of trade restrictions on Canberra, which include Australian iron ore, beef, lobster, timber, lamb and warned stopping of Australian coal exports to China.³ And in May 2020, Beijing slapped an 80 percent "anti-dumping" tariff on Australian barley, a move that was expected to cost Australia 500 million Australian dollars (USD 350 million) a year. Notwithstanding their economic interdependence, Japan and Australia are now following hedging strategies against China.

The security system in the western Pacific has been premised on the US led hub-and-spoke model in which the US is committed to guaranteeing the security of its allies. This is different from the 'collective security' principle of NATO, so neither Japan nor Australia is bound to reciprocate in a US led military campaign against China over Taiwan unless their security is in danger. Japan has been shedding its pacifist nature of the security policy and emboldening its defence capabilities, including the 'possession of so-called enemy-base strike capability',⁴ to meet the challenges as a 'normal' military power. It has recently decided to purchase 105 F-35 jets from the US worth \$23 billion and another joint development program with the US's Lockheed Martin for a new generation fighter jet F-3 replacing the existing F-2 at the cost of \$40 billion.⁵ Australia has already spent \$17 billion to purchase 72 advanced F35A fighter jets and is also mulling to acquire B-21 stealth bombers to counter future challenges. Canberra is expected to spend \$270 billion in this decade for defence, including upgrading existing bases and inducting long-range strike capabilities.⁶

The US has been pushing the regional allies to take more responsibility for their security and regional stability. This is in consonance with America's new geopolitical orientation which calls for countries that have until now counted on US protection and support to learn to fend for themselves. Japan and Australia are the two closest allies of the US in the region, so do they formulate policies according to US' strategic interests in the region. When the AUKUS was signed Tokyo was excluded from it which surprised many as to the ability of Japanese contribution in Biden's Indo-Pacific strategy. However, Tokyo's nuclear policy of three no's – not possessing, not producing, and not permitting the introduction of nuclear weapons – forced it distancing from the AUKUS pact. The new defence pact would facilitate close coordination with the US forces to meet

the challenges posed by China. Australia has already indicated its willingness to provide assistance to the US if China invaded Taiwan.⁷ Now Japanese bases are available for Australian forces while participating in the US led operations against China in a Taiwan fiasco. A formal agreement is necessary for using Japanese bases by foreign forces other than the US.

Implications for India

Quad is the pan Indo-Pacific grouping comprising India, Japan, Australia, and the US, however, as of now security is not a major agenda of the quad,⁸ while the US is seeking military commitments from allies and partners to secure the stability of the Indo-Pacific. As a result, Indo-Pacific security architecture appears to be seen as two types of strategy; a military strategy for the Pacific part in which the US, Japan, and Australia would play active roles, while strategic orientation for the Indian Ocean part where India would be the anchor to facilitate strategic partnerships not only with the quad members but also with countries such as the UK, France, Germany, and Russia. In this regard, India should strategise its position in the larger Indo-Pacific as well as in the Indian Ocean region.

Notes:-

1 *The Japan Times*, “Japan and Australia sign 'landmark' defense treaty amid concern over China”, January 6, 2022. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/01/06/national/japan-australia-landmark-defense-treaty/>, accessed on January 1, 2022.

2 Gordon Lubold “U.S. Troops Have Been Deployed in Taiwan for at Least a Year” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 7, 2021. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-troops-have-been-deployed-in-taiwan-for-at-least-a-year-11633614043>, accessed on January 7, 2022.

3 *ABC News*, “Australia called for a COVID-19 probe. China responded with a trade war,” January 3, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-01-03/heres-what-happened-between-china-and-australia-in-2020/13019242>, accessed on January 6, 2022.

4 Shinzo Abe, “**Press Conference by the Prime Minister on a Meeting of the National Security Council and Other Matters**”, Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 19 October 2021. https://japan.kantei.go.jp/100_kishida/statement/202110/_00015.html, accessed on January 7, 2022.

5 *The Japan Times*, “Japan will work with Lockheed Martin on a new fighter jet, Defense Ministry says”, December 18, 2020. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/12/18/national/lockheed-martin-new-fighter-jet/>, accessed on January 6, 2022.

6 *ABC News*, "Australia to spend \$270b building larger military to prepare for 'poorer, more dangerous world and rise of China" July 1, 2020. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-30/australia-unveils-10-year-defence-strategy/12408232>, accessed on January 6, 2022.

7 Demetri Sevastopulo “Australia vows to help US defend Taiwan from Chinese attacks”, *Financial Times*, November 13, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/231df882-6667-4145-bc92-d1a54bccf333>, accessed on January 6, 2022.

8 The White House, “Joint Statement from Quad Leaders”, September 24, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/24/joint-statement-from-quad-leaders/>, accessed on January 7, 2022.