

Australia-US convergence on the “Indo-Pacific”: AUSMIN 2018

By David Scott

The AUSMIN meeting held last month brought together the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Secretary of Defense James Mattis with the Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs Julie Bishop and Minister for Defense Marise Payne. Its Indo-Pacific focus was unmistakable. Whereas the 2017 AUSMIN Joint Declaration mentioned the “Indo-Pacific” but once and for the first time at AUSMIN, the 2018 Joint Declaration mentioned the “Indo-Pacific” 11 times; with the “Asia-Pacific,” the previously dominant term of strategic reference, unmentioned.

Certainly other issues were noted in the 2018 AUSMIN Joint Declaration; including Russia’s role in the shooting down of Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17 in Eastern Ukraine in 2014, ensuring ISIS defeat in Syria and Iraq, and continuing anti-Taliban support of Afghanistan. However, the main focus of the Joint Declaration was the Indo-Pacific where it “emphasized both nations’ strong and deepening engagement in the Indo-Pacific” and “the significance of the Indo-Pacific to our shared future.” As such, the Joint Declaration represents the convergence between Australia’s espousal of Indo-Pacific frameworks first seen in its 2013 Defense White Paper, and American espousal of “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” frameworks in the Trump administration since autumn 2017. The Joint Declaration stressed a broad convergence, “our shared strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific, which has diplomatic, security, and economic dimensions.”

Some uncontroversial socio-economic objectives were highlighted in the Joint Declaration for application in the Indo-Pacific: “the United States and Australia decided to collaborate to reduce the threat of emerging infectious diseases in the Indo-Pacific region,” and to “reinforce objectives of Australia’s Health Security Initiative for the Indo-Pacific.”

Alongside such uncontroversial social initiatives were expressions of economic cooperation. With regard to the Pacific basin, the Joint Declaration highlighted that they “support closer cooperation to promote the security, stability, resilience, and development of Pacific Island countries”; and “highlighted the importance of strengthening regional information sharing, maritime security, and domain awareness.” This was a tacit response to China’s greater prominence in the Southern Pacific. Further economic cooperation was pinpointed:

“The Secretaries and Ministers committed to increased bilateral and multilateral cooperation on economic development in the Indo-Pacific, recognizing that security and prosperity are mutually reinforcing. Our two governments will work together, and with partners, to support principles-based and sustainable infrastructure development in the region, which will promote growth and stability.”

Though un-stated, this represented a response to China’s Maritime Silk Road (MSR) infrastructure initiative. Such responses had also been the focus of the “Trilateral Infrastructure Working Group” which brought together Japanese, Indian, and US officials in February 2018 to foster “increased connectivity in the Indo-Pacific.”

Dr. David Scott explains that “The Joint Declaration represents the convergence between Australia’s espousal of Indo-Pacific frameworks first seen in its 2013 Defense White Paper, and American espousal of “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” frameworks in the Trump administration since autumn 2017.”

The AUSMIN meeting in July 2018 set out broad Indo-Pacific values. This echoed the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” concept and strategy unveiled by Shinzo Abe in 2016 and adopted by Donald Trump at the APEC summit in November 2017, which has become the mantra in US strategic formulations. Hence the 2018 AUSMIN Joint Declaration that:

“They made clear their commitment to work together – and with partners – to shape an Indo-Pacific that is open, inclusive, prosperous, and rules-based [...] The United States and Australia highlighted the priority each places on supporting an international rules-based order, alongside allies and partners. In the Indo-Pacific, that order has underpinned decades of stability, democracy, and prosperity.”

This was an implicit critique of China, with AUSMIN mention of other “allies and partners” pointing to strategic geometry and potential constraint of China.

In the Joint Declaration, the “open” refers to concerns of a closed Maritime Silk Road push by China, and to the (SCS) being closed down by China achieving its “U-shaped line” claim and thereby making it a Chinese Lake. The focus on “free/democracy” refers to China’s non-democratic authoritarianism. The “rules-based order” refers to China’s rejection of the SCS rulings made by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in July 2016. The SCS was prominent elsewhere in the Joint Declaration; which stressed Australia-US concerns over Chinese “militarization of disputed features” and reiterated the importance of “freedom of navigation and overflight.” This point raised the question of joint freedom of navigation operations there by the two allies – to consolidate established US unilateral naval deployments, and Australian unilateral aerial deployments. Given that bilateral Australian-UK freedom of navigation operations in the SCS are being mooted for 2019, this would be an obvious development in US-Australian defense cooperation.

The Joint Declaration “highlighted the importance of US-Australia defense cooperation in the Indo-Pacific,” with the strategic value of the US Marine Rotational Force at Darwin and enhanced air cooperation both restressed and enhanced; together with further naval cooperation where “the principals also decided to integrate US force elements into Australia’s annual Indo-Pacific Endeavour exercise.” Darwin’s importance continues to grow as a convenient jump point for deployment and operation further westwards to the Indian Ocean, further northwards to the SCS and further eastwards to the Pacific Ocean.

Wider defense cooperation was pinpointed in the Joint Declaration; “strengthening bilateral security partnerships with like-minded Indo-Pacific nations through joint training and exercise opportunities.” As to who these like-minded Indo-Pacific nations were, “they welcomed the recent US-Australia-India-Japan consultations on the Indo-Pacific in Singapore and reaffirmed their commitment to strengthen trilateral dialogue with Japan.”

The “trilateral dialogue with Japan” refers to the Australia-Japan-US (AJUS) strategic dialogue mechanism in operation since 2002; which has moved to increasingly significant air force and naval cooperation in the West Pacific and SCS, to China’s unease. The eighth AJUS ministerial meeting, due later in 2018, is expected to mark a formal shift to “Indo-Pacific” terms of reference, echoing the “Indo-Pacific” anchoring already seen in the fourth Australia-India-Japan (AIJ) trilateral, held on 21 July 2018.

The “US-Australia-India-Japan consultations on the Indo-Pacific” refers to the Quad mechanism revived in November 2017. The Quad meeting in June 2018 stressed their common push “for a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region where all countries respect sovereignty, international law, including with respect to freedom of navigation and overflight;” based on “a common commitment, founded on shared democratic values and principles, to uphold and strengthen the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific” and to strengthen “maritime cooperation.”

The explicit message of the AUSMIN meeting was a strategic focus on the Indo-Pacific. The implicit message of much of the Joint Declaration was that, despite their stated hopes that “both nations continue to place a high priority on constructive and beneficial engagement with China,” in reality tacit counter-measures were on show.

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