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NEW ZEALAND AND JAPAN FORGE A STRONGER PARTNERSHIP

The recent visit to New Zealand by Japan’s Foreign Minister, Fumio Kishida, received less attention here than it deserved. It signalled a significant elevation of the bilateral relationship to that of a strategic cooperative partnership. Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs website notes that outcome was one of Minister Kishida’s visit objectives.

The 9 June joint statement by Foreign Minister McCully and Minister Kishida noted that both sides “renewed their commitment to pursue a cooperative approach to the challenges facing the region and the international community based on their shared values and vision and to this end to strengthen their bilateral engagement”.

There were important undertakings to deepen cooperation in disaster mitigation reflecting our common experiences of recent devastating earthquakes, and to hold regular Pacific consultations to strengthen cooperation on Pacific issues and enhance development coordination in the region. Both countries agreed to promote the stability and prosperity of the wider Asia/Pacific region through multilateral institutions such as APEC, the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Regional Forum {ARF}, and to strengthen maritime order based on established international law including UNCLOS. And they committed to working together on the establishment of marine protected areas under the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources {CCAMLR}, although Russia has since unfortunately stymied that initiative, at least for the time being.

These are all welcome developments, but the discussions were particularly noteworthy in the fields of trade and defence. The commitment to open “a new and more ambitious chapter in the bilateral economic relationship” and Minister Kishida’s expressed readiness to cooperate with New Zealand in the Trans-Pacific Partnership negotiations which Japan recently announced it would join, signalled important steps forward in the growth of trade and economic ties. The announcement of the proposed signing of a Memorandum of Intent on Defence Cooperation will significantly enhance cooperation in the security field.

While bilateral defence cooperation with Japan has increased in recent years, the pace of change has been slow in the absence of a framework setting out both countries aspirations in respect of the defence relationship. Current cooperation includes regular talks at officials level, reciprocal visits by naval ships, some {albeit limited} exercise participation, ship rider opportunities, educational exchanges and cooperation in regional defence forums such as the ARF Defence Dialogue process and the Expert Working Groups set up by the ASEAN Defence Ministers Plus forum. But no mention is made of any of these activities in the extensive section of Japan's 2013 Defence White Paper that covers Japan's defence relationships.

Once the Memorandum is in place we can expect further opportunities to open up, including perhaps cooperation in the field of peacekeeping {Japan's Self Defence Force has excellent engineer, medical and logistic capabilities – skills that are in short supply in UN peacekeeping operations}; joint projects, including with Australia, such as the removal of World War Two ordnance which can still be found throughout large parts of the South Pacific, and in a wider range of exercises {although scrutiny of the scenarios would be wise}.. There may be an early opportunity to conclude the agreement when the Minister of Defence, the Hon Jonathan Coleman meets his Japanese counterpart, Itsunori Onodera, in Brunei in August at the second ASEAN Defence Ministers Plus forum, a relatively new building block in the region's security architecture, that includes the ten ASEAN countries, Australia, New Zealand, China, Japan, the ROK, India, the United States and Russia.

With the bilateral relationship now elevated to that of a strategic cooperative partnership perhaps the time is now right to look for other ways of marking this increasingly important relationship. Japan's role in the Second World War left a difficult legacy for some New Zealanders for a considerable time. But events have moved on. Why not then commemorate in 2014 the fact that a Japanese battle cruiser was one of the naval ships that escorted the ships carrying our troops to Europe to ensure they arrived safely at a time when considerable concern was held over the activities of German cruisers operating in the vicinity of that deployment. Japanese naval ships were also regular visitors to our ports during the War. As we gear up for a wide range of ceremonies in 2014 the fact that we were in a sense strategic partners a century ago deserves recognition.

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