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## Hitting its stride but needing to run: the case to hasten Australia-Japan defence cooperation

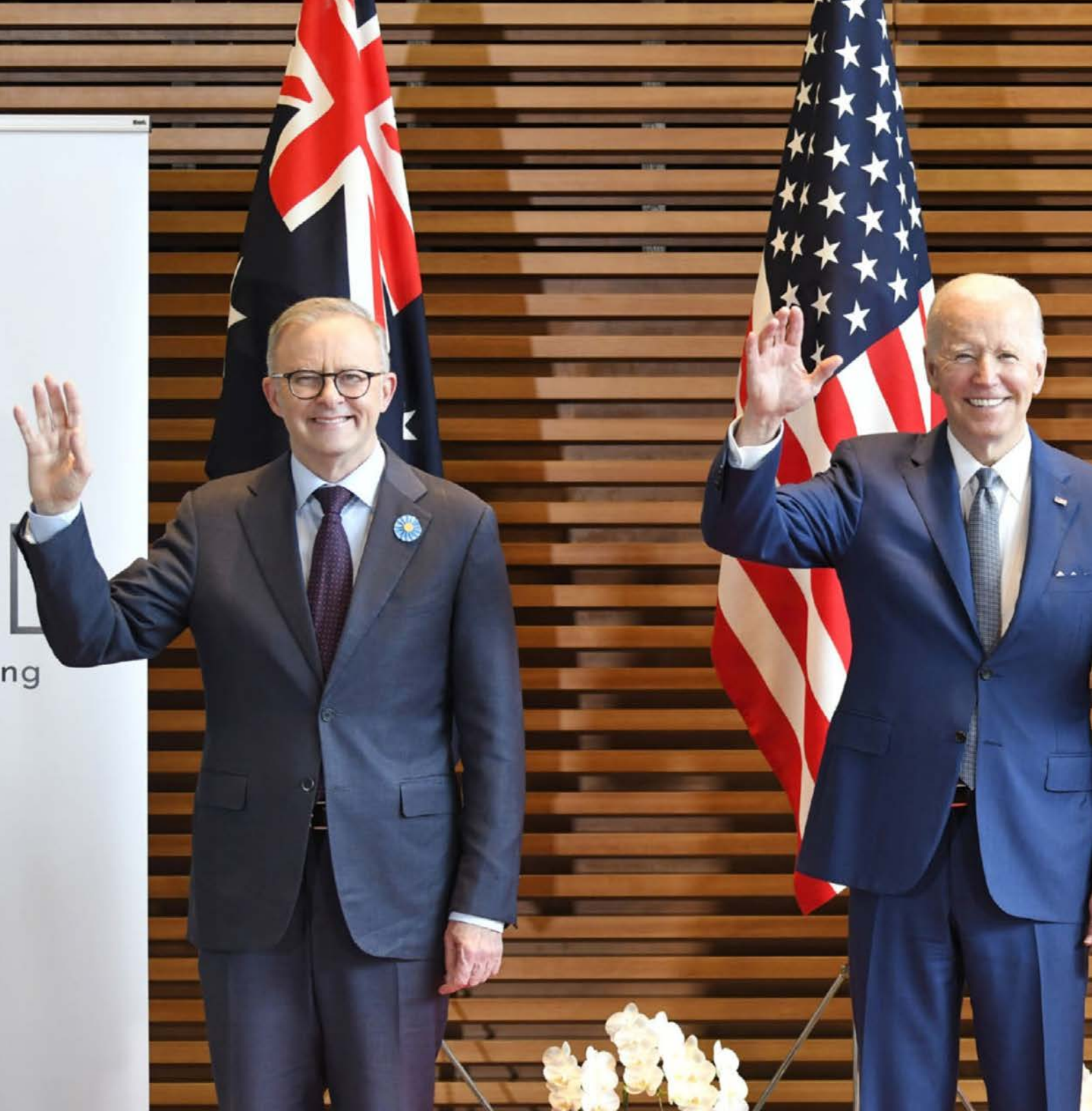
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Perth USAsia Centre

INDO-PACIFIC ANALYSIS BRIEFS 2022





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The Perth USAsia Centre's Indo-Pacific Analysis Briefs seek to provide perceptive and contemporary insights from across the region. The series features leading analysts from Asia, Australia and the US to deliver up-to-the-minute assessments on issues of national and regional importance. This series will shine a light on the issues that remain critically important to Australia and the Indo-Pacific at a time when global events may otherwise dominate the news cycle.



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## KEY ASSESSMENTS

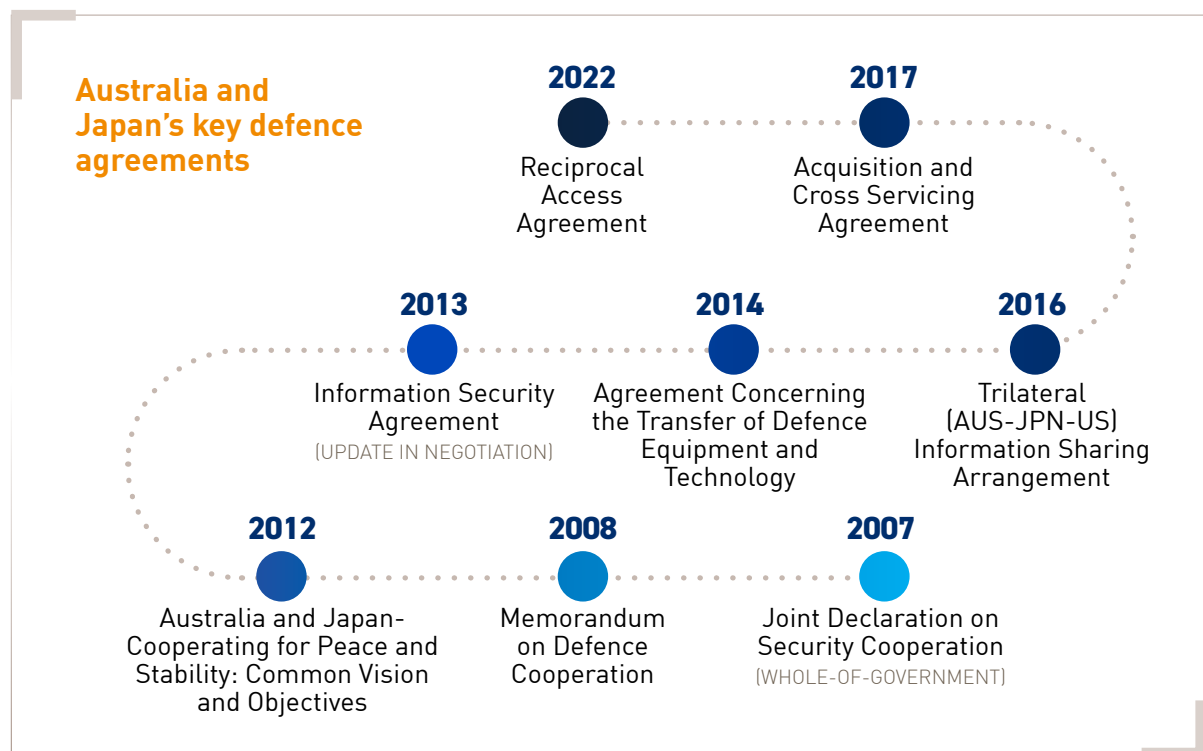
- Reduced strategic warning time for conflict has put a premium on hastening Australia and Japan's collective defence ability
- Three areas to speed up cooperation include ratifying and implementing the RAA, improving bilateral military communications, and enhancing interoperability
- Australia and Japan's leaders and defence establishments need to increase their risk tolerances and flexibility and be willing to operate in areas of discomfort
- Removing impediments to faster cooperation will allow Australia and Japan to increase their military preparedness and deterrence ability

With a conventional war in Europe, China's military expansion and territorial ambitions, and great power competition, the security outlook for many Indo-Pacific countries is increasingly fraught. In this context, shoring up defences and military preparedness is an undesirable but necessary reality, including for Australia and Japan. Australia and Japan's bilateral alliances with the United States and like-minded strategic outlooks have placed their defence cooperation on solid ground and an upwards trajectory. Their defence engagement is already sufficiently broad. The next usual step would be to increase depth of cooperation, which both countries are striving to achieve. However, in addition to depth, there is a concurrent challenge for Australia-Japan defence relations, that being the need to hasten cooperation.

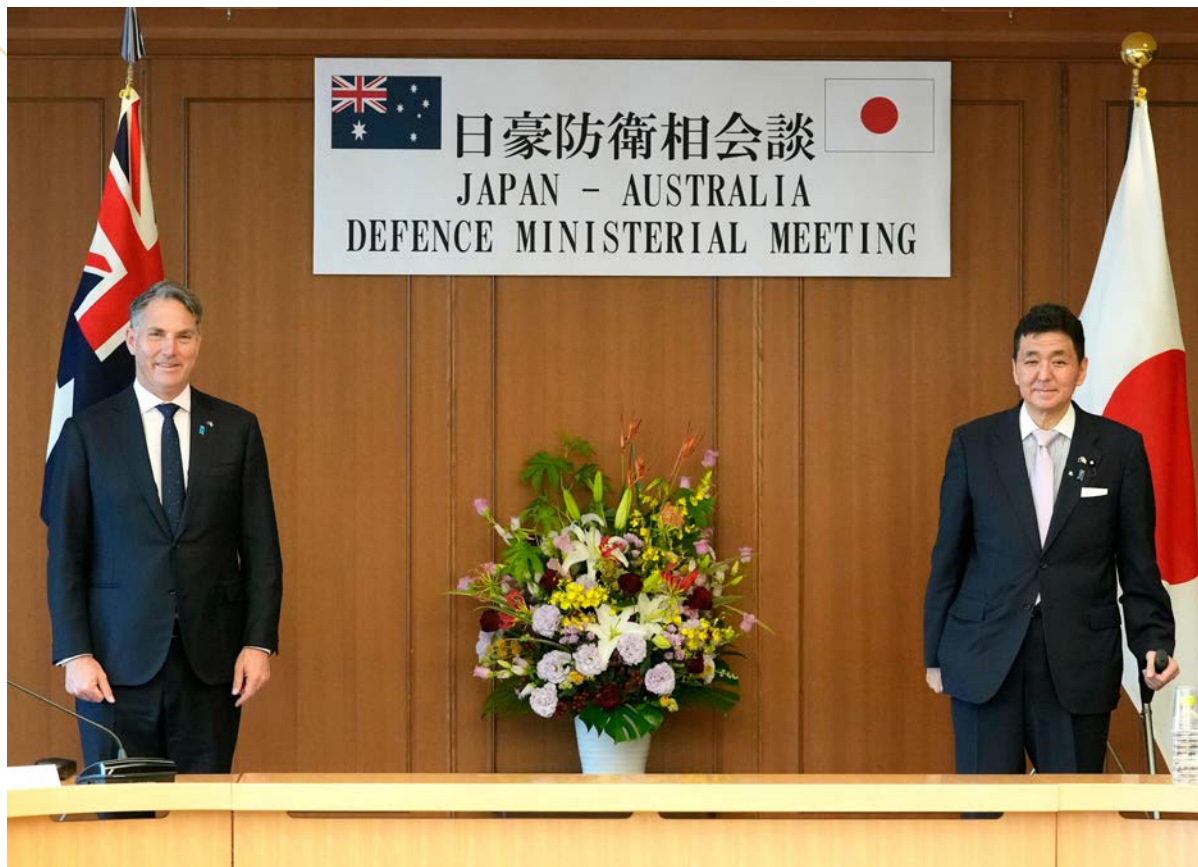
**Regional strategic dynamics are evolving rapidly and Australia-Japan defence cooperation needs to speed up to keep pace with the challenge.** Regional circumstances are necessitating a pace-change in Australia-Japan defence cooperation and all levels of government and military must work towards achieving this. In both Australia and Japan, two factors will be critical in this regard: firstly, leaders should consider accepting a higher level of political and sovereign risk in expanding cooperation mandates more quickly and secondly, defence forces and agencies should increase their flexibility to facilitate faster bilateral cooperation.

### Gaining momentum but not speed

Beginning in the early 1990s but really ramping up from the mid-2000s, Australia-Japan defence cooperation has advanced across the spectrum. Their cooperation now spans military exercises across their armies, navies and air forces, science and technology collaboration, and meetings at the highest levels of government, including bilateral defence meetings and '2+2' **Foreign and Defence Ministers' Meetings**. As well as the 2+2 meeting, they participate in Defence policy, equipment and technology, space and cyber talks; military talks between all three Services; and a policy official exchange, whereby officials from both countries are embedded within their counterpart Defence agency. Clearly, Australia and Japan's ambitions to grow the defence relationship have harmonised in recent decades and much activity has happened during the first half of 2022 alone.







In January 2022, the historic Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) was agreed 'in principle'. In April, Australia and Japan reached a new military milestone with a RAAF plane conducting an air-to-air refuelling of a Japanese fighter aircraft over Japan. On May 24, newly elected Prime Minister Albanese and Prime Minister Kishida met on the sidelines of the Quad Summit and Australia and Japan's major ground exercise, Exercise Southern Jackaroo, concluded on May 31. Australia and Japan's defence ministers also met in June, twice: first, on the sidelines of the Shangri La Dialogue as part of the Trilateral Defence Ministers' Meeting with the United States and again bilaterally in Tokyo.

Taken together, these high-level meetings and exercises will increase trust and personal ties, build familiarity of combat tactics, techniques and procedures, and ultimately develop defence interoperability – all of which are critical factors to enhancing the effectiveness of future, real-world Australia-Japan military operations.

Defence cooperation at the pace seen recently between Australia and Japan is to be celebrated. Civilian defence agencies are large organisations, weighed down by bureaucratic processes and military forces are geared towards protecting sovereign capability and concealing military planning and strategy. In recent years, Australia and Japan have done much to overcome these obstacles and close the gap between where their defence cooperation currently stands and where it needs to be. Despite the positive trend line, Australia and Japan must break new speed barriers to cooperate more closely on defence.

## Lessons from the Reciprocal Access Agreement

With the RAA agreed in principle, lawmakers must now work to ratify the agreement. The length of time this will take is uncertain but ratification is expected sometime in 2023. In the interim, both sides are committed to working 'in the spirit' of the agreement. Once fully implemented, the RAA will **provide the legal framework** for the Australian Defence Force (ADF) and Japan Self Defense Force (JSDF) to operate on each other's soil – something they already do but with the burden of delaying legal procedures. In practical terms, the RAA will facilitate easier access for military personnel and equipment to each other's defence bases and ports. It sounds simple enough, but it took the best part of a decade to negotiate, with scoping discussions starting in 2014.

Reasons for the lengthy negotiations despite close bilateral ties and strategic rationale are **many and complex**. In part, it was politically challenging for Japan to forge a new military partnership outside its alliance relationship with the United States. The many negative associations Japan has regarding the US' Status of Forces Agreement imposed on it after World War II made the RAA – a similar but comparatively different agreement – difficult to justify domestically. Another delaying factor was the different criminal laws in Australia and Japan, notably Japan's use of the death penalty and that ADF members would be subject to it (an issue **still being resolved**). This was also the first agreement of its kind for Japan and would set the precedent for future RAAs.

In short, Japan and Australia broke new ground with the RAA. Going forward however, neither country can afford to wait multiple years to accommodate trade-style negotiations that seek to secure the best possible deal for each side. **Australia and Japan must prioritise defence cooperation and interoperability over domestic political priorities and sensitivities.**

Both countries appreciate the considerable reduction in strategic warning time for conflict in our region and the catastrophic implications of a conventional war. Australia's 2020 Strategic Defence Update and **defence analysts** have assessed a reduction in strategic warning time and Japanese **Defence Minister Kishi has talked** about the need to speed up defence capabilities at a 'radically different pace' due to the 'rapidly' changing regional environment. If we commence down a similar path the RAA trod in other defence cooperation areas, each country will face diminishing returns as regional dynamics outpace military preparedness.

## Need for speed

More than any event in the post-World War II era, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has highlighted the need for Australia and Japan to improve their collective defence ability more quickly. This is not because Russia presents a likely military threat to Australia and Japan (although Japan has a its own **territorial dispute** with Russia) but because of the second and third order implications for the Indo-Pacific of its illegal invasion. Russia's war in Ukraine has **upended several decades** of entrenched defence policy in multiple European capitals in the space of less than three months. Russia's rapid escalation to an invasion demonstrates that conventional attack warning times are shortening and the security of an entire region can change with little notice.

As harrowing as it is to forecast a conventional war in the Indo-Pacific, Australia and Japan must be clear-eyed about the potential for a major confrontation, such as **China forcibly re-taking Taiwan**. China has warned it would **not hesitate to fight** if Taiwan sought independence and, in that scenario, Japan and Australia as US allies and with a heavy stake in the geostrategic, economic, and humanitarian outcomes could be quickly drawn into a conflict. In recent times, references have been made at the highest levels in Japan and Australia regarding a possible Taiwan contingency. In May, Prime Minister **Kishida appealed** to the international community

never to tolerate a “unilateral attempt to change the status quo” by force in East Asia and, in March, former Australian Defence Minister Peter Dutton indicated **potential future military support** for Taiwan. Even the potential for smaller skirmishes in our dynamically evolving region necessitates a stronger defence presence and enhanced interoperability between the ADF and JSDF.

### Three defence cooperation areas to expedite

#### FIRST AND FOREMOST, THE RAA MUST BE RATIFIED AND IMPLEMENTED AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.

On 24 May, prime ministers Albanese and Kishida committed to the **‘early entry into force’** of the RAA. Australia’s Parliament is expected to pass the RAA with little trouble this year while the situation is more complicated for Japan’s Diet. While there are few concerns on the Australian side, detailed discussions on the RAA in Japan are ongoing, including comparisons with the US Status of Forces Agreement. The bill connected with the RAA is expected to be submitted to the Diet later this year or early next. For the bill to pass on its first showing, it will need to be robust enough to withstand Diet discussion. If not, it could ultimately delay Diet approval of the RAA. Once ratification occurs, the implementation challenge begins. There will be a period of transition as Australia and Japan adjust to the practicalities of the arrangement such as the new management processes for military operations.

#### A SECOND AREA TO EXPEDITE IS INCREASING THE DEPTH AND COMPLEXITY OF BILATERAL DEFENCE EXERCISES.

Although the ADF and JSDF cooperate regularly across all three Services, their cooperation could be deeper. Critical to creating depth and technical complexity in the joint operations of any two defence forces is strong military to military communications. The ADF and JSDF should aim to have the same seamless, frequent, and solid communications they enjoy with the United States. In relation to maritime exercise Nichi Gou Trident in November and fighter jet exercise **Bushido Guardian** next year, the benchmark for success will be how much our navies and air forces are able to improve communications, allowing for greater depth in cooperation.

#### THE THIRD AREA TO HASTEN IS ADF-JSDF INTEROPERABILITY.

At present, the ADF and JSDF perform separate components of a military exercise to form a whole: both forces need to move to working on the same component of the exercise, simultaneously. One tactic used to speed up interoperability is the practice of embedding military officers within partner forces. Embedding personnel reveals similarities and differences in military practices and operations, paving the way for each to adapt as a combined force. Australia and Japan have reciprocal **army liaison embeds** and, for the recently concluded exercise Southern Jackaroo, sniper teams **trained together**, incorporating translators to overcome the language barrier. Australia and Japan should expand to embedding their air force and navy officers with their counterpart Services, such as having a Royal Australian Navy liaison embedded on a Japanese vessel during exercise Nichi Gou Trident. Having Australian and Japanese military personnel embedded with each other during exercise, accompanied by translators, could help speed up interoperability.

### Speed comes with imperative

Russia’s war in Ukraine does not directly increase the likelihood of conflict in the Indo-Pacific but Moscow’s actions have shattered assumptions that conventional wars were relegated to



history. As much as all nations seek to avoid a similar fate in the Indo-Pacific, Australia and Japan may have to confront military aggression in kind, with little warning. Following the sudden earthquake-tsunami-nuclear triple disaster in Japan in 2011, the ADF was forced to make quick decisions and take action, attempting some tasks for the first time, without time to receive the necessary approvals. While not faced with a natural disaster today, Australia and Japan confront a regional environment where conflict could break out suddenly and similar swift decisions and action will be required.

Defence forces and officials on both sides have already expanded their workloads to advance cooperation into new territory. However, they need to increase their risk tolerances and flexibility and be willing to operate in areas of discomfort. Further, they require bolder political direction and backing to speed up this positive trajectory. A new leader and government in Australia and relatively new prime minister in Japan and their respective defence ministers should consider accepting greater political and security risk associated with revealing national defence capabilities and planning so bilateral cooperation can advance faster. Should Australia and Japan succeed in speeding up their defence cooperation, they will be better positioned to respond in a regional emergency requiring military action.



Australian Chief of the Defence Force Gen. Angus Campbell talks with Japan Ground Self-Defense Force soldiers during his visit to the Urban Operations Training Facility at Mount Bunday Training Area, NT, Australia, June 17, 2021. The CDF visited MBTA to observe U.S. Marines with Marine Rotational Force - Darwin, ADF soldiers and JGSDF soldiers during Exercise Southern Jackaroo. Defence ties between the United States, allies and partner nations are critical to regional security, cooperation and integration of our combined capabilities.



## About the Perth USAsia Centre

The Perth USAsia Centre located at The University of Western Australia is a non-partisan, not-for-profit institution strengthening relationships and strategic thinking between Australia, the Indo-Pacific and the USA. The Centre is a leading think tank focusing on geopolitical issues, policy development and building a strategic affairs community across government, business and academia. Since the Centre's inception in 2013, we have collaborated with over forty partners to convene more than four hundred programs across sixteen cities in eight countries, engaging a world-class community of over 10,000 strategic thinkers and policy leaders.

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