

A friendly Lazarus in Tokyo

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Australia-Japan relations could well be in for a sustained period of deeper and broader co-operation because of the recent political earthquakes in Japan and the Lazarus-like rise of Shinzo Abe. In 2007, the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan's crushing upper-house election defeat sounded the death knell for Abe's brief and troubled first stint as prime minister and signalled the eventual end, in 2009, of more than five decades of LDP electoral hegemony. The LDP's resounding victory in Sunday's upper-house election, following similar landslides in the December 2009 parliamentary and the June Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly elections, completed Abe's revival from political death and returned the LDP to its natural position at the apex of Japanese politics. Abe is now Japan's most powerful politician in decades.

His personal popularity, on the back of an economic upsurge under "Abenomics", is reaching levels last seen under prime minister Junichiro Koizumi, while Abe's position within the re-emboldened LDP is stronger than Koizumi's ever was. The party, again, faces no serious opposition. The LDP, with its small Buddhist coalition partner Komeito, won 76 out of the 121 seats up for grabs on Sunday. The former ruling Democratic Party of Japan fell to 17 seats while three parties, including the Communists, won eight seats each. Australia and its bipartisan Asian engagement project could be one of the biggest beneficiaries of Abe's second term as prime minister. Abe has long appreciated and acted on the strategic and economic significance of Australia to Japan. Like most modern Japanese leaders, he holds an Asia-Pacific, Australia and United

States-included view of "the region", not an east Asian, Australia and United States-excluded one, as did former prime minister Yukio Hatoyama. Australia-Japan relations flourished during Abe's first short term as leader, being elevated to a true strategic partnership. In March 2007 in Tokyo, prime ministers Abe and Howard launched free trade talks and signed the Joint Declaration on Security Co-operation. Abe's commitment to using free trade as a tool for structural reform was the key political factor that permitted the start of free trade talks. John Howard's understanding that Japan was Australia's closest and most important partner in Asia, and Abe and Howard's shared belief in stronger support for the US's continued strategic primacy in east Asia led to the security declaration, the first that Japan had ever committed itself to.

Abe's second term, particularly given his stronger political position and greater political nous, should promise even more if Australian leaders respond appropriately. Abe's successful cajoling of the free-trade-shy LDP to sign up to the Trans-Pacific Partnership's liberal conditions of membership (something China has not done) is a clear sign that his commitment to free trade has not waned. With Australian officials confident that bilateral free trade talks are in their final stages, Abe's return could be the political factor that seals this deal. This would deliver Australia its first bilateral free trade agreement with a major Asian economy. Abe and the LDP's return to power also provide greater scope for bilateral security co-operation. Abe is the first Japanese prime minister in more than a decade to call for an increase to Japanese defence spending and wants a new

defence white paper focused on enhancing Japanese maritime, air and amphibious capabilities and Japan's ability to better support US-led multinational operations. This is very much in line with the strategic thinking and capability announcements in Australia's 2009 Defence white paper produced during Kevin Rudd's troubled first term as prime minister. As Tony Abbott has promised if he becomes prime minister, Abe's first trip as prime minister, this time, was to south-east Asia. Consistent with present Australian policy, under Abe Mark 2, Japan has focused on the strategic importance of south-east Asia and enhancing regional states' maritime surveillance capabilities. Just as Australia has done, Japan has recently committed to donating vessels to the under-resourced Philippine Coast Guard.

Greater co-ordination between Tokyo and Canberra on enhancing south-east Asia's surveillance capabilities over its busy sea lines of communication, which both Australia and Japan rely on, would add a potentially rich regional defence co-operation dimension to the bilateral security relationship. Australia's recent decision to join the Japanese-led Regional Co-operation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia will provide a strong regional basis for greater co-operation. If played right in Canberra, Abe's second term as prime minister could deliver even more to Australia and Australia-Japan relations than his first term.

Malcolm Cook is dean of the School of International Studies at Flinders University and a non-resident fellow of the **Lowy Institute** for International Policy.