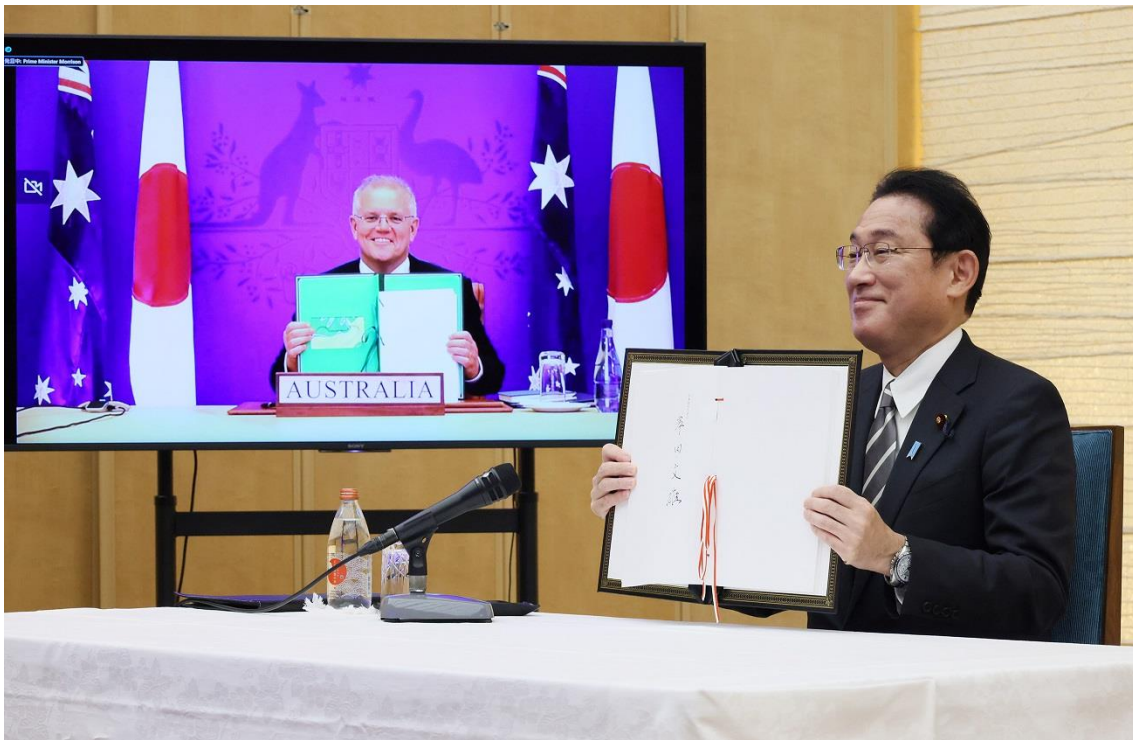


News From Under the Southern Cross (Edition 51): The Japan-Australia Leaders' Summit

7 January



A Happy New Year to you all.

Like last year, I intend to spare no effort to raise the profile of Australia in Japan, and Japan in Australia. I welcome your support and encouragement towards this endeavour.

1. The PM visit to Australia that eluded us

As I am now able to reveal, the truth is that I didn't have a holiday over the end-of-year and the new-year period. The reason is that I was vigorously busy to materialise a visit to Australia by Prime Minister KISHIDA Fumio.

Japan and Australia have an established agreement to hold annual reciprocal leaders' visits. The last prime ministerial visit took place in November 2020 when Prime Minister Scott Morrison visited Japan. As such, this time it was Japan's turn for its Prime Minister to pay a visit to Australia. While the visit should have taken place last year, measures in response to the COVID

pandemic and the change in Japan's leadership made it difficult to make it happen. This is why the start of this year was seen as an ideal time for a visit.

2. Great expectations from the Australian side and a 'Great Match'

Prime Ministers Kishida and Morrison have already held two Leaders' Summits together. The first took place online soon after Prime Minister Kishida came into office. The second was a face-to-face meeting on the sidelines of the COP26 that took place in Glasgow.

In his remarks made after their meeting, Prime Minister Kishida told the assembled media that he had conducted a very fruitful exchange with Prime Minister Morrison, adding that they had already hit it off, in other words, had become "mates", at their prior online meeting. It is often said that personal relationships built on trust are crucial for leader-level diplomacy, and it certainly seems that both leaders are a great match. So of course the Australian side, including Prime Minister Morrison, was expectantly awaiting a visit to Australia by the Prime Minister of Japan.



Japan-Australia Summit Meeting in Glasgow

In Australia, Christmas through to Australia Day (January 26) is the summer vacation period. It is similar in that sense to the O-bon period in Japan. (Note: O-bon is in mid-August. It is traditionally a time for family members to go back to their hometown and to get together to pay tribute to their ancestors.)

Despite this, given how extraordinarily important the visit was to be, the Australian side gave up their vacation period in order to make preparations. I too was working in Canberra on both New Year's Eve and New Year's Day, and was engaged in preparations in Sydney from the 3rd of January.

3. Darn it, Omicron!

But then the Omicron variant situation in Japan underwent a sudden change. For the first time in months, the number of newly infected people in Tokyo and Okinawa surpassed 100 respectively. As it was not possible for the Prime Minister to leave Japan while this situation was unfolding, the decision was made to cancel the visit to Australia.

If the visit had gone ahead, it would have been the first time a Japanese prime minister had chosen Australia as the initial destination for a bilateral visit after assuming office (PM Kishida did travel to Glasgow in the UK last year, but this was to attend an international conference). As such, there was great expectation among all stakeholders on both sides involved in the Japan-Australia relationship.

Of course, it fell on me as Ambassador to be the first to relay to the Australian side that the visit had been cancelled. It was a tough role to perform. What helped was the warm words that I received in response, telling me that all was understood as the Australian side had experienced similar struggles when managing the Black Summer bushfires.

What was really tough was that I had to give my staff (a combined team of diplomats and locally engaged staff from the Embassy in Canberra, as well as the Consulate-Generals in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane), all of whom had hardly slept a wink in making preparations for the visit, the order to cease operations. When I conveyed this in a conference room at the Shangri-La Hotel, where the delegation of Prime Minister was scheduled to stay, looking upon the glistening eyes of several attendees, I felt utterly crushed.

4. The Summit shifts on-line

Yet the Japan-Australia relationship cannot be flattened just by Omicron. The guts with which a certain former Australian prime minister, after receiving news that the visit to Australia had been cancelled, remarked "bloody virus!", was a feeling shared among people on both sides of the Japan-Australia relationship.

So gathering ourselves up again, we held a virtual Leaders' Summit on the 6th of January, and

thanks to the Australian side's kind consideration, I could join the meeting at Parliament House in Canberra. A Joint Statement was released at its conclusion (the content of the statement can be read [here](#)).

5. Signing the breakthrough Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA)

But that wasn't all. The RAA, which had been negotiated at length since 2014, was finalised, with the leaders of both countries adding their signatures to it.

The Self-Defense Forces of Japan and the Australian Defence Force already conduct a range of joint exercises and training together, yet this Agreement incorporates a legal framework that clearly defines entry procedures for both countries for personnel and equipment, as well as jurisdiction should there be any incidents or accidents. This Agreement constitutes Japan's first ever RAA (see [here](#) for an overview of the Agreement).

As the security situation in the Indo-Pacific region, including the South and East China Seas, grows ever more severe, the defence agencies of our two nations will be strongly expected to increase both the quality and quantity of their cooperation, thereby strengthening deterrence in the region. The fact that both leaders signed the Agreement themselves underlines its historic significance.



Above - JGSDF personnel participating in EX TALISMAN SABRE (2021) (Source: JGSDF)

Left - JMSDF ship JS Inazuma and RAN HMAS Warramunga in Exercise NICHU GOU TRIDENT (2021) (Source: Australian Department of Defence)

6. The Great Comeback

I am resolved to re-double the efforts of the Embassy, as the frontline envoy for the Japanese Government, to bring about a visit to Australia in the near future by the Prime Minister of Japan, a visit that we weren't able to realise this time around as a result of the Omicron variant.

“Nothing beats meeting in person” is an acute feeling both Japan and Australia share based on our experience dealing with the restrictions imposed by COVID-19.

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