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AUSTRALIA, INDIA AND JAPAN
TRILATERAL:
Breaking the Mould

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TRILATERAL:

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ABSTRACT

After the first trilateral dialogue between Australia, India and Japan in June 2015, another trilateral process immediately got underway. This paper makes an assessment of the prospects of this new formation in the light of history, contemporary coalescing interests, and the inadequacies of the existing trilaterals. While the conventional view is that this trilateral is merely an offshoot of US foreign policy and ranged against China, this paper argues that the formation stands on firm, independent and enduring ground: irrespective of the US, and not necessarily against China.

INTRODUCTION

The idea and practice of a trilateral configuration between Australia, Japan and India has recently found more believers. In the face of a virtual 'alphabet soup' of regional multilateral processes—as well as other trilaterals mushrooming across Asia's political landscape and extended geography—a trilateral realignment between the three seems par for the course, at least at first glance. At the academic level, as far back as in the late 1960s, a conference of scholars and officials from the three countries had floated the idea of a trilateral. Nearly half a century later, all three—as long-standing representative democracies committed to a rule-based international order, and seafaring economies heavily dependent on maritime commerce—are 'rebalancing' their strategic priorities. An emerging trilateral arrangement between Australia, India and Japan has thus become unexceptional. The

'resurrecting' all-round profile of Asia in the new century, and China's surge within it, adds to such urgency.

Each of these three nations can claim to be a regional power in its own right: Australia as an established middle power, India an aspiring superpower, and Japan a 'has-been economic superpower' now ready to 'normalise' into a military power. Bilaterally, Australia and Japan have maintained a close security relationship, and India and Japan, to a lesser extent. But it is Australia and India's newfound bonhomie that sets the stage for a trilateral. In addition to the long-time Australia-Japan nexus in the Asia-Pacific, the increasing use and precedence of the Indo-Pacific over the erstwhile Asia-Pacific as part of the larger strategic vocabulary—terminologically as well as territorially, by way of inclusion of the Indian Ocean—eases India into that emerging trilateral strategic calculus.

This paper examines two questions: One, what forces and circumstances are driving and moulding this trilateral? Two, how does this trilateral stand against some of the other leading trilaterals, and what are the broader strategic implications of such an alignment on major players in the region and beyond? This paper argues that the security interests of the three countries have come to coalesce in such a compelling fashion that the trilateral is not a transient tactical undertaking by the three countries but rather holds lasting strategic significance. Contesting the predominant view that the trilateral is nothing more than a proxy to the US-led quadrilateral whose objective is the strategic balancing of China, if not its containment, this paper submits that the trilateral stands on its own and is not necessarily aimed against China nor is in favour of the US.

This paper opens by tracing the history of the trilateral between Australia, India and Japan, highlighting the ideational undercurrents of a cooperative framework that contemporary scholars have earlier studied. It outlines the evolution of the three separate bilateral relationships, contrasting their dynamics against what has broadly shaped the emergence of the trilateral as an overarching whole. The paper then describes their unfolding common maritime interests and anxieties in the Indian Ocean flowing from a shared appreciation of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic idea. The paper makes a comparison with some other trilaterals to establish the relative feasibility of this one, then examines the potential impact of the trilateral on the US and China, as well as on broader regional developments. The paper closes by

taking final stock of the trilateral and reckoning the direction in which the trilateral is likely to proceed.

THE IDEA OF A TRILATERAL: OLD WINE IN AN OLD BOTTLE

It is sometimes stated in Western circles that there ought to be greater cooperation between India, Japan and Australia, especially in the military sphere. This view often arises from considerations of the positions of China and the US, viewing China as the state which needs to be contained, and the US as the state which, while containing it at present, cannot be expected to do so forever, and certainly cannot be expected to continue doing so alone. It is the search for some local containment of China that usually leads to the suggestion that the three countries get together.¹

The above paragraph may sound instinctively connected with the current, frenzied geopolitical events in the Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific. Except that these remarks were made long ago, in the late 1960s, by J.D.B Miller, then a leading professor of International Relations at Australian National University, whose ideas were documented in a volume from an academic conference on a trilateral between the three countries.² That a trilateral between the three could even be theoretically conceived of in the most unlikely circumstances—an avowedly White Australia tied to a big power but far-off ally for security, a non-aligned India preoccupied with post-colonial socio-economic reconstruction, and a post-War Japan focused on economy and commerce while completely dependent on a big power for security—provides strong support to the emerging idea of this trilateral. Between the three, while Australia and Japan shared some common denominators, India had barely registered on Japan's diplomatic radar and vice versa, while Australia's interactions with India were limited to perfunctory Commonwealth appearances and the occasional 'Third World' initiatives such as the Colombo Plan. Against such an unpropitious backdrop, Miller had cited Alastair Buchan, the Director of the Institute for Strategic Studies in London who envisioned an Asian balance of power based not on “any integrated military alliance but a diplomatic coalition of the stronger powers...The core of the system would be a treaty of mutual cooperation between India, Australia and Japan...”³ He then went on to quote Paul Hasluck, Australia's Minister of External Affairs, who had posited in 1966, “If

we are to think of a contribution to the rebuilding of Asia, it seems to me that the three powers best fitted by their resources to make a massive contribution in the region itself, to the rebuilding of Asia, are Japan, India and Australia. I like to think of them as possibly the three points on which the legs of a tripod might rest in order to support a great contribution to Asia...”⁴

Such academic hypothesising could not be set aside easily; it had basis in sound reasoning. Miller enumerated five conditions that prepared the ground for cooperation between states: similarity of cultural background; economic equality (or the lack of economic inequality); the habit of association in past international enterprises; a sense of common danger; and pressure from a greater power. Of these, he said, “a sense of common danger provided the greatest prospect of a firm foundation for cooperation between the three”, in a clear reference to Communist China. Even as Miller himself concluded that “the obstacles to cooperation seem to be more influential at present”, he tempered his conclusion by saying: “If either China's or the United States' stance in international relations changes radically, India, Japan and Australia will be forced to reconsider their habits of ensuring their own security”.⁵

The makings of a trilateral between Australia, India and Japan are thus rooted in long past academic discussions, now being proven prescient. More recently, scholars had detected signs of “imitation” in the Asia-Pacific especially among Australia, Japan and India in the backdrop of the US doctrine of pre-emption, with each of these countries articulating a rationale for pre-emption, albeit in their individual contexts.⁶ Quite ironically, therefore, the trilateral venture could even be characterised as an ideational extrapolation from the widely discredited Bush doctrine of pre-emptively rallying, a ‘coalition of the willing’.

However, while that convergence was predicated on possible threats from non-state actors, the newly emerging configuration along trilateral lines between the three countries is likely to be driven by the imperative to enforce rule-bound behaviour from ‘newly deviant’ state actors. Then, according to Aurelia George Mulgan, Professor at the University of New South Wales, the emerging security tie-ups outside the bilateral framework represent a ‘minilateral rather than a multilateralist approach, which sought to formalise and regularise security relations among a small number of regional partners and establish a new grouping with a *closed rather than open membership*’.⁷ The trilateral is thus at best a concerted, proactive undertaking to give shape to

the evolution of a more predictable and peaceful regional order, lest the region remain susceptible to the vagaries of newer, possibly inchoate and even 'invisible' threats, as well as those from 'established' state actors.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE TRILATERAL

Is the evolution of a trilateral between Australia, India and Japan, a sum of each of the component bilaterals? Not necessarily. Even though each of the component bilaterals would involve their own specific historical particularities, in many ways, the individual divergences would be subordinated to the overarching purpose of the trilateral. Still, the three bilateral relations serve as the foundational pillars of this trilateral.

AUSTRALIA AND JAPAN

Sharing the classic “Lilliputian syndrome” in their sense of isolation in Asia, Australia and Japan have built a relationship which constitutes the most enduring pillar of the trilateral. After the War, Australia had made a climbdown from its earlier demands of excessive penalty on Japan which was followed by the two joining in the US' 'hub and spoke' arrangement. Japan, self-circumscribed by its Constitution, contributed through bases and territory, while Australia did so through troops deputed to US-UN-led military campaigns. Australia and Japan, in many cases separate from the US, had also cooperated on the building of a regional economic order through a series of processes and institutions, the high watermark being the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). Notably, both have not only cooperated in regional institution-building but have also assisted each other in gaining membership in those institutions. Just as Australia had facilitated post-War Japan's acceptability into the mainstream international order, albeit through a security bargain with the US, Japan is repaying Australia by helping it gain membership in regional institutions such as the East Asia Forum and ASEM. Moreover, for over 40 years, Japan has been Australia's largest trading partner—Australia, as Japan's largest supplier of raw material, remains the bulwark of its industrial strength.

Nonetheless, with the US wavering on its strategic commitment to Asia-Pacific—first demonstrated in the Nixon doctrine after the Cold War

thawed—the two countries had to progressively re-evaluate their regional security priorities. In a way, US President Barack Obama's 'Asia pivot' policy can be viewed as a 'repackaged' Nixon doctrine, wherein the US has called for an increased responsibility for the local players: regional actors were not merely expected to provide troop deployments but also incur higher military expenditure. It is that context which brings Australia and Japan even closer. The 'common democratic values' leveraged as soft power form the foundational basis for this bonding, along with a shared commitment and respect for international rules and norms.

Long before the 2007 Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation, the 1995 Joint Declaration on the Australia-Japan Partnership had included closer security cooperation. Further, annual bilateral dialogue on security matters was implemented in 1997 along with the establishment of a military attaché system.⁸ When Japan and Australia began annual consultations between their defence ministries and diplomatic bureau chiefs and vice-ministers in 1996, a section led by former Australian Ambassador to the US, Rawdon Dalrymple, even started to view the enhanced Japan-Australia dialogue as a possible counterweight to the US-dominated security system.⁹ As if on demonstration some years later, with the relative absence of the US in East Timor, the two countries cooperated closely.¹⁰ The advent of terrorism as a policy challenge post-9/11 and the Bali bombings in October 2002 precipitated upgrading of consultation and intelligence sharing between the two countries.¹¹ Then, during Japan's non-combat efforts in Iraq in 2004-2006, they were provided cover by the Australian troops. All this culminated in March 2007 when Australia became the first country apart from the US with which Japan signed a security declaration. Notably, the agreement had pledged support for Japan against North Korean abduction and for denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula.

This camaraderie has endured with the governments of Tony Abbott in Australia and Shinzō Abe in Japan taking charge. Indeed, Abbott's distinguishing Japan as 'Australia's best friend in Asia', and a large section of the Japanese media and officialdom portraying the 2007 Security Declaration as a 'quasi-alliance', illustrates the solidification of that camaraderie. The July 2014 Agreement Concerning the Defence Equipment and Technology¹² as part of the Special Strategic Partnership for the 21st Century, envisioning Australia replacing its Collins class submarines with Japan's Soryu class

boats, signals Japan's return as an arms exporter.¹³ Though the recent 'competitive evaluation process' has cast a shadow on the submarine deal, the relationship has covered uncharted ground, given that submarine technology is a closely guarded secret today.¹⁴

AUSTRALIA AND INDIA

Even as scholars debate whether Australia was responsible for it or India, that 'strategic detachment' has defined the Australia-India bilateral dynamic during the Cold War is uncontested. A newly independent post-colonial India spearheading the 'idealism' of decolonisation, racial equality and non-alignment was at odds with an officially White Australia, a defender of apartheid and colonialism,¹⁵ and a security ally of a distant power steeped in 'realism'. The extent of this ideological gulf rendered the shared legacies of democracy, Commonwealth and the associated legal-institutional offshoots 'inadequate' in bridging the gulf between the two.

During the early post-War period, the two had barely engaged with each other except in multilateral contexts such as the Asia Relations Conference (ARC), the Commonwealth meets, and Colombo Plan activities. Significantly, whereas Australia had been tough on Japan at the International Military Tribunal, India had presented the sole dissenting voice, favouring Japan in opposition to US occupation.¹⁶ The Sino-Indian War in 1962 was perhaps the first important international political-military event on which Australia and India's position converged, despite the undercurrents of passivity.

Moreover, India kept a distance because of Australia's tilt towards Pakistan. The widespread belief was that because of the US, perhaps unfairly from the Indian viewpoint, Australia had struck a disproportionately close link with Pakistan.¹⁷ However, other research has also shown how such an assumption is only partly sound, given that a succession of Australian High Commissioners to India and other officials had repeatedly counselled stronger Australia-India ties and a de-hyphenating of India-Pakistan in Australia's strategic worldview.¹⁸ Additionally, the prompt recognition of Bangladesh by Australia had created some Indian goodwill, which was expected to receive an impetus within a year with the incoming Labour Prime Minister Gough Whitlam's trailblazing 'Asia-pivoted' foreign policy. However, a series of incidents including India's Treaty of Friendship with the

Soviet Union, nuclear tests in 1974, and the imposition of the Emergency in 1975 halted this evolving dynamism. Yet, the Fraser government's talks with India on the strategic primacy of both the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific region—laying the ground for the Indo-Pacific construct—did keep the engagement ticking.¹⁹ Significantly, the National Council of the Australian Defence Association in its submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade had expressed alarm over India's security build-up in the Indian Ocean which was turned down by the committee.²⁰ According to the 1990 Australian Senate Committee of Inquiry into Australia-India relations, “the relationship is neglected, underdeveloped and suffers from a high state of ignorance”, a situation which was hardly redressed by the occasional initiatives of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating governments even as the Cold War was waning.²¹ India's nuclear tests in 1998 only made matters worse. Yet by 2001, the inaugural Australia-India Foreign Ministerial Framework Dialogue under the Howard-Vajpayee governments' leadership was followed by the first India-Australia Strategic Dialogue at a senior official level, in the same year.

Ironically, the John Howard government's announcement of supplying uranium to India in 2006 – albeit taking its cue from the Indo-US deal – was the ice-breaker between the two countries. Further to collaborating on several multilateral fora such as the ARF, the East Asia Summit and the latest ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) Plus (which also includes ASEAN's eight dialogue partners),²² the relationship received a boost in November 2009 with the Kevin Rudd and Manmohan Singh governments announcing a Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation. The first ever visit of an Indian Defence Minister, A. K. Antony, to Canberra in June 2013 was another symbol of synergising security interests. The September 2014 uranium deal between Tony Abbott and Narendra Modi has elevated the relationship further, followed by the November 2014 Framework for Security Cooperation. In September 2015, India and Australia conducted their first ever bilateral maritime exercise named AUSINDEX-15 at Visakhapatnam.

INDIA AND JAPAN

The bilateral relationship between India and Japan has been one of the weaker links in the trilateral, historically speaking. No doubt, during the Second

World War, a segment of the Indian independence movement led by Subhash Chandra Bose sought to co-opt Japan in a bid to overthrow British colonial rule. After the war, though Bose's contribution was relatively marginalised in the post-colonial Indian political narrative (partly due to his early demise), Japan as a country was well acknowledged by India. As mentioned earlier, India had been the sole dissenting voice in favour of Japan at the international military tribunal.²³ India not only waived the war reparation on Japan but also signed a separate peace treaty. It was also one of the first countries to establish diplomatic ties with Japan. But as the Cold War progressed with Japan cemented as a treaty ally of the US, and India embarked on a path of non-alignment, the two countries remained distant for the longest time. Except for the Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) component, an inward-looking, export-pessimist Indian economy also did not attract the attention of Japan, whose eyes were set on commercial investments.

Japan began to notice India as the latter's economy opened up and the Cold War ended. Buoyed by economic self-assurance, the Indian foreign policy too developed a more *realpolitik* framework removed from non-alignment. Meanwhile, Japan's economy began to falter, eventually facing a recession. In the 1990s, during the Asian financial crisis, as Japan sought regional leadership by proposing an Asian monetary fund, a regional variant of IMF and spearheading the ASEAN Plus 3 (Japan, China and South Korea) campaign, it was opposed by none but the US, especially over the monetary fund. The 1998 nuclear tests saw Japan like Australia, emerging as a trenchant critic of India (and of Pakistan, too). Yet even as the Japan-US treaty alliance was fortified by the 1997 Defence Guidelines, Japan was also warily observing US' overtures to China. Internally, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in Japan itself was experiencing a political churn with the failing of the Hashimoto-led faction's pro-China stance – due to Chinese non-reciprocity – thereby precipitating a surge in fortunes of the pro-Taiwan Mori faction.

In the backdrop of such tumultuous events, the famed 'Global Partnership in the 21st century' between Prime Ministers Yoshirō Mori and Atal Bihari Vajpayee in 2000 marked a watershed in the two countries' relations. Although the inspiration for Global Partnership was more external than bilateral, the stage had been set for annual summit meetings. A comprehensive bilateral strategic dialogue was achieved by 2001, which was

later upgraded to India-Japan Strategic and Global Partnership in 2006, institutionalising strategic dialogue at the foreign minister level. However, it was the Joint Declaration between Prime Ministers Aso Taro and Manmohan Singh in 2008 – only the third such arrangement by Japan after similar ones with the US and Australia – that was the precursor to this trilateral between Australia, India and Japan. Meanwhile, Japan also changed its policy from opposing India's membership in regional forums including APEC and ARF to canvassing for India, an endeavour that succeeded with India's accession to the East Asia Summit (EAS). The Hatoyama government, following through with the action plan of the previous LDP government, demonstrated the bipartisan political consensus towards India, with the high point being the decision to hold 2+2 dialogues at the cabinet and senior officials level.

The return of Shinzo Abe to power in 2012 came with a promise of taking the relationship to a new level. Back in 2007, Abe had claimed that he would not be surprised if “in another decade Japan-India relations overtook US-Japan and Japan-China ties”.²⁴ Narendra Modi's own rise to power in 2014 makes Abe's task easier, with the two complementing each other well. As the duo upgraded bilateral ties to a Special Strategic and Global Partnership in September 2014, defence technology (with India considering buying Japan's US-2 amphibious patrol aircraft), defence preparedness and maritime security formed the key themes underlying their security relationship. Economically, India has been among the largest recipients of Japanese Official Development Assistance (ODA), only to be bolstered by their Economic Partnership Agreement. Notably, it was Abe who had also indirectly sowed the seeds of a trilateral between Australia, India and Japan (albeit in the context of the Quadrilateral and Democracy), a signal which was then acknowledged and brought to pass by Australia and India. In 2015, India began considering Japan for inclusion in its bilateral maritime exercise with the US (Operation Malabar) apart from the annual Japan-India Maritime Exercise (JIMEX). Given that Tokyo had also participated in the Malabar exercises in 2014, the Modi-led BJP government's current dithering on whether to include Japan this year, is an astute diplomatic signal to China.

AMONOLITH WITH A SINGULAR PURPOSE

Even as the bilateral relations have evolved over the years, the maturing of individual 'national characters' – themselves consistent with a more

universally identifiable set of values and practices – has laid the robust ideological foundations for a trilateral. For instance, the democratisation of Japanese political culture, in contrast to its militarist past, makes it more acceptable as a security partner for Australia and India. Similarly, Australia's abandoning of its White Australia and anti-immigration policy has made it more palatable to both Japan and India, particularly the latter. Similarly, the emergence of the Indian economy from the shadow of a so-called 'Hindu' growth rate, and Indian foreign policy jettisoning non-alignment pretensions, would be welcome to both Australia and Japan.

Notwithstanding the evolution of the bilateral relations and networks and their contribution to the trilateral, the trilateral as a whole has its own rationale and character. The three countries are not only democracies and maritime powers with maritime interests; there are also common extraneous variables that propel them into a trilateral, overriding individual differences. That they are all placed in a conceptually common geographical setting courtesy the 'shift' from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific is the first reason for them to coalesce. The pivoting of the Indian Ocean as the nucleus of commerce and transit for all three including Japan, therefore becomes significant.

Secondly, when the reigning superpower, the US exhibits diminished strategic commitment to the region, the three coming together in a trilateral becomes almost inevitable. Some argue that the trilateral has been even conceived and promoted at the instance of none other than the US, with the quadrilateral in the background. This might be a simplistic reading. This paper argues that the trilateral between Australia, India and Japan is progressing and will progress not because of, but in spite of, the US.

Finally, that China is the big elephant in the room has not been missed by anyone. But again, mindful that the trilateral is independent of the US, it is not implausible to say that if Australia and India can embrace the emerging Japanese revisionism, there is a likelihood that they also will/can acquiesce to Chinese revisionism. China, after all, has become the largest trading partner of both Australia and Japan and the second largest partner of India. Moreover, all three countries have avoided overplaying the so-called Chinese threat and have even pursued security engagements with the Middle Kingdom. Australia and India reconciling with Japanese revisionism illustrates how the expediency of the trilateral as a whole has overcome

individual differences. Another instance is the Australian civil nuclear deal with India, despite Japanese reservations. Therefore, while the trilateral in its functioning is yet to evolve as a complete monolith given its incipience, the rationale of its origin and formation underlines a singular overarching purpose, namely, to strengthen security cooperation between the three countries.

THE TRILATERAL AND THE IDEA OF 'INDO-PACIFIC'

Maritime interests and concerns have been key in shaping this trilateral. While the countries' individual geographies remain constant, the geographical expanse of their interests keep shifting, flowing from the change in the nature and character of their seaborne interests, threat perceptions and capacities over the years.

As the balance of geopolitical, and especially geo-economic, power shifts from Europe and the Americas, to Asia in the 21st century, the strategic weight of the Indian Ocean has increasingly upstaged the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. One instance of this is that over a third of the world's bulk cargo traffic, half of world's container traffic and 70 percent of petroleum products travel through the Indian Ocean.²⁵ The Indian Ocean has been called “the centre stage for the challenges of the 21st century”.²⁶ It is this extraordinary relevance of the Indian Ocean, coincident with the rise of India and China and their strategic competition in this theatre apart from the US 'pivot' – which has consolidated the term 'Indo-Pacific' eclipsing 'Asia-Pacific'. India joining the trilateral has added a certain cachet to this Indo-Pacific idea. The then Australian Defence Minister Stephen Smith acknowledged in 2011, “So significant is India's rise that the notion of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic concept is starting to gain traction”. He further said: “India and Australia with the two most significant and advanced navies in the Indian Ocean Rim region, are natural security partners in the Indo-Pacific region”.²⁷ In 2007, Abe in his address to the Indian Parliament had posited the idea of dynamic coupling of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, effectively introducing the concept of Indo-Pacific.²⁸ Significantly, Japan's Defence White Paper 2015 has noted 'Australia setting out the “Indo-Pacific” concept', displaying a consensus on the subject.²⁹ Therefore, the Indian Ocean and Indo-Pacific have become the territorial-conceptual axis around which the trilateral revolves.

As for practical implications, given that Australia's Indian Ocean coastline is longer than those along the Pacific or Southern Oceans, and that the country has extensive offshore oil and gas facilities to its North-west in the Indian Ocean, its stakes in the region are substantial. In fact, Australia has the largest area of maritime jurisdiction in the Indian Ocean. The Defence White Paper 2013 says, "As Australia further develops the North-West Shelf as a global source of liquefied natural gas and other petroleum resource exports, freedom and security of the sea lines of communication (SLOC) in the Indian Ocean will become even more important to us".³⁰

Likewise, even if Japan is physically distant from the Indian Ocean, over 80 percent of its energy imports transit through the Indian Ocean. The ever-rising incidents of piracy, especially in the Gulf of Aden, besides relentless Chinese expansive designs, make the region critical for the island country. From the days of the much-derided 'chequebook diplomacy' in the first Gulf War, to making non-combat contribution in Afghanistan and Iraq under the Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law, to mounting anti-piracy operations in the Western Indian Ocean – Japan's engagement with the Indian Ocean has only intensified – and is in no smaller measure than that of Australia and India. Even as it has constitutionally-legally grappled with the idea of switching from non-military static deterrence to 'combative' dynamic deterrence, and still does so, Yoshihara and Holmes write, "Japan remained an Indian Ocean power". Since Japan lacks the capacity for a simultaneous 'two-front' military campaign – namely, addressing a near-home security scenario in sync with a far-off extra-regional mission – as advanced by Yoshihara and Holmes, its joining a trilateral with India and Australia makes sense. Perhaps this 'strategic insufficiency' on the part of Japan pushes it further into the embrace of Australia and India in a trilateral framework. India, being a resident power, and Australia as a partially resident power, in the Indian Ocean can address Japanese strategic anxieties.

The 'Malaccan dilemma' vis-a-vis China (Chinese keenness to secure the Malaccan Straits) is another overlapping strategic concern for both Japan and India. Australia and India have also joined the Japan-initiated Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships (ReCAAP), the first intergovernmental anti-piracy agreement. As Japanese forces increasingly field themselves in offensive theatres afar even in a defensive role, the role of other combat troops, including those of

Australia and India, as a bulwark of protection, becomes crucial. In return, besides the prospect of Japan supplying defence material to Australia, according to East Asia Intelligence Reports, Japan is also assisting India build dual-use runways on some of the far-off Indian Ocean islands.³¹ Significantly in 2006, then Japanese Foreign Minister Aso Taro had placed the 'arc of freedom and prosperity' along the Indian Ocean Region. In July 2011, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) opened Japan's own base facility in Djibouti to sustain counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. In 2013, Abe's much-heralded essay, *Asia's Democratic Security Diamond*, highlighted the importance of freedom of navigation for trading nations including Japan, Australia and India.³² In 2014, among the recommendations that Abe's panel of security experts made on the revision of the country's Constitution, was that of extending Japan's right to aid in countries located along the sea lines of communication (SLOC) extending out to the Persian Gulf, even when Japan was not under direct attack. Also importantly, the Abe government's revised guidelines on defence equipment transfers prioritise weapons export to countries facing sea lanes through which Japan imports crude oil.³³ The execution of Japanese hostages in the Middle East by ISIS earlier in 2015 would have further strengthened the resolve of the Japanese government.

With a coastline of over 7,500 km, including those of the 27 Lakshadweep islands and the 572 Andaman and Nicobar islands, India too has massive stakes in its maritime territory – including ocean wealth and offshore man-made installations. More than the mere truism that 'the Indian Ocean is India's lake', India's widely acknowledged capacity to deliver security goods in the Indian Ocean is a source of attraction for Australia and Japan. And there is added credibility when US endorses this view, with the US Quadrennial Defense Review, 2010, depicting India as a “net provider of security in the Indian Ocean”.³⁴ Building on its natural advantage, India has adopted a four-way process of reinforcing its prominence in the Indian Ocean – hardware and asset upgrading along with establishment of newer installations, diplomatic outreach coupled with operational partnerships with other littoral states and extra-regional powers, sponsoring newer institutional processes such as the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, and increasingly standing up as a role model by successfully conducting operations at sea. Of these four, the Indian Navy's upgrading of hardware through both acquisitions and now indigenisation (through 'Make in India') on the back of a consistently rising budget should

inspire confidence in Australia and Japan. The April 2015 successful evacuation of Indians (as well as foreign nationals, including Pakistanis) from war-torn Yemen by the Indian Navy is another example. As of 15 March 2015, the Indian Navy had successfully thwarted 40 attempts of piracy in the Gulf of Aden since 2008.³⁵ Therefore, the steadily aligning security concerns of the three countries, both vis-a-vis state and non-state actors in the Indian Ocean, their operational experiences in multilateral and bilateral frameworks, and above all their ideological confluence on the Indo-Pacific, make a plausible case for a trilateral.

AUSTRALIA, INDIA, JAPAN TRILATERAL: FIRST AMONG EQUALS?

Surely, the emerging trilateral between Australia, India and Japan is not the first one of its kind. A series of trilaterals and indeed a quadrilateral have preceded it. This trilateral thus elicits comparison with the existing trilaterals (and one quadrilateral) comprising, among others: Australia-US-Japan, Australia-US-Japan-India, China-Japan-Korea, US-Japan-Korea, US-Japan-China, US-Japan-India and US-China-India. How does the Australia-India-Japan (hereafter AIJ) trilateral find itself placed against them, notwithstanding its more recent origin? Surely, because of its very recent origin, a detailed comparative assessment with earlier groupings is neither fair nor possible. However, based on brief analytical descriptions of earlier trilaterals, an attempt is being made for a broad comparison.

Of all the other trilaterals, the Australia-US-Japan one has attracted most attention in recent times. Drawing on the security cooperation legacies of the twin bilaterals of Australia-US and Japan-US centred on the US-led hub-and-spoke arrangement, this trilateral has gained momentum in recent years. The inauguration of the centrepiece Australia-Japan-US Trilateral Security Dialogue in March 2006 was the culmination of what was first mooted in 2001, followed by official level talks which were raised to ministerial levels from 2005. The July 2014 defence equipment agreement between Australia and Japan envisioning a submarine deal, notwithstanding the recent Australian announcement of a competitive evaluation process, partially crystallises this trilateral into a traditional state-centric formation from a non-traditional non-state centric one.³⁶ Additionally, the three countries maintain close diplomatic cooperation on global terrorism and proliferation

of weapons of mass destruction (through the Proliferation Security Initiative). Expectedly, the trilateral's strategic focus on piracy and terrorism around the Straits of Malacca, a predominantly Muslim-populated region is being viewed with caution by some regional players. The expansion of the trilateral into a quadrilateral incorporating India is to partly address that perception gap given India's own large Muslim population and its well-acknowledged secular record. However, Chinese resistance led to an early demise of the quadrilateral in 2008, with both Australia and India succumbing to Chinese pressure. Many argue that the AIJ trilateral is essentially born of the womb of this quadrilateral, implying that the AIJ has the tacit backing of the US and is principally arrayed against China. Whether the US will completely support it in the long run depends on the future shape and direction of the trilateral. But in the near term, the US seems to be supporting it. Testimony to this is the fact that soon after the first high-level trilateral dialogue of the AIJ in June 2015, the US Vice President announced, in July, the elevation of the trilateral dialogue involving the US, Japan and India (first held in 2011) to a ministerial level. Of course the step could also be interpreted as a reaction in a strategic environment bristling with 'competitive trilateralism' – given that the US and Australia diverge on many counts, the foremost being on China. Either way, with or without US support in the long run, the Australia-India-Japan trilateral by itself stands on firm ground.

Evidently, the US is a member of most of these trilaterals evocative of the hub-and-spoke architecture. The difference is that the bilateral arrangements with the US at the centre have been replaced or supplemented by trilateral configurations. The US taking recourse to trilaterals, as opposed to the hitherto bilateral, suggests declining US power as well as the unfolding of more complicated geopolitical contexts. Within the much-hyped Australia-US-Japan trilateral itself, each party is seemingly proceeding at cross purposes. James Schoff, a senior associate with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's Asia Program and an active participant in this process admits that while Japan's focus was deterrence vis-a-vis China, Australia looked to expand its operational opportunities with the others with the US keen on building larger regional architecture.³⁷

On the question of whether the AIJ is ranged against China and whether China should be concerned about a close Australia-Japan security

partnership, Peter Jennings, Executive Director of Australian Strategic Policy Institute writes, “The reality is that China has nothing to fear and something to gain from closer Australia-Japan ties...Beijing should want to encourage stronger ties between Japan and its friends because this reinforces the Japanese orientation as being part of the region rather than separate from it...”³⁸ That Abe has undertaken defence cooperative measures with China alongside the Maritime Coordination Mechanism, building on the earlier initiatives,³⁹ signifies an intent to keep China engaged.⁴⁰ And the retreat by both Australia and India on the quadrilateral reaffirms that the AIJ will not necessarily take an anti-China position.

Incidentally, in 2010, China might have been more wary of the US-Japan-Korea trilateral in Northeast Asia, a venture begun in the 1990s chiefly directed at North Korea. According to James Schoff, because of a flurry of infractions by North Korea including the unconfirmed nuclear tests, sinking of Cheonan and bombardment of Yeonpyeong island, the US-Japan-Korea trilateral had acquired a certain dynamism in 2010, but seemed to peter out due to persisting Japan-Korea antipathy. The announcement of a US-Japan-South Korea trilateral commission to be permanently based in Washington in 2012 is an effort to reinvigorate it.⁴¹ Additionally, the 2014 memorandum of understanding (MoU) on sharing military intelligence on North Korean nuclear and missile tests is a milestone, and a first step towards military cooperation between Japan and Korea. Yet, the need for US mediation between Japan and Korea on intelligence exchange reveals the distrust underlying the Japan-Korea bilateral equation, casting doubts on the durability of the trilateral itself, a not-so-adverse situation for China. In 2010, Professors Hyeran Jo and Jongryn Mo wrote that “the approach these countries have actually followed has been rather ad hoc, focusing more on the problem of North Korea than on providing any long-term vision for comprehensive cooperative issues”. They essentially blame the singular focus on North Korea for the faltering of this trilateral.⁴² From the AIJ's viewpoint, the resolution of the nuclearisation of the Korean peninsula would be a welcome development.

Meanwhile, China has spearheaded its own trilateral in Northeast Asia banding together with Japan and Korea. Given its origin in the aftermath of the 1997 financial crisis, this trilateral was initially an economic enterprise, later diversifying into non-traditional security with state security remaining

a non-starter. Despite the members' geographical proximity, close working experience at the ASEAN Plus Three (APT), stabilising China-Korea relations, it has not made much progress due to two historically sensitive bilateral equations: China and Japan, and Japan and Korea. Since 2008, the trilateral has even held summits independent of APT. In 2011, it decided to hold a Trilateral Policy Dialogue on Asian Affairs, even setting up a Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (based in Seoul)⁴³ but to no avail. No summits have been held since 2012. In March 2015, at the first trilateral foreign ministers' meeting in three years, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi was quoted to have said, "The most important outcome of the meeting was having a reference to "facing history squarely" included in the joint press release".⁴⁴ While the Joint Statement also committed to bringing about an early Summit meet, the invoking of history makes this a sterile exercise.

The US-Japan-India trilateral, mentioned briefly earlier, can also be termed an offshoot of the quadrilateral; it is another example of how the US has been nurturing a series of trilaterals dovetailing into its larger rebalancing strategy. The US cultivating India through the nuclear accord and lifting the long-existing technology denial regime have been path-breaking measures from the US-India standpoint. The recent warming of India-Japan relations with a visible personal chemistry between Modi and Abe has led to the September 2014 Special Strategic and Global Partnership. This has been built on the Japan-India Security Agreement of 2008 which itself was modelled after the 2007 Australia-Japan defence accord,⁴⁵ a clear signal of aligning of security perceptions and strategies. The US-Japan-India trilateral is premised on the political geography spanning South Asia and East Asia, a similar formulation to the Indo-Pacific construct. The July 2015 announcement of Japan joining the Indo-US Malabar exercises in the Indian Ocean is one instance of actualising that construct. In many ways, this trilateral would be strategically equivalent to the AIJ trilateral where Australia serves as a substitute (in terms of mere presence, not capacity) for the US and vice versa.

However, a more nuanced examination would reveal that Australia and the US have their own differences. As things are, China has become Australia's largest trading partner and will likely remain so in the foreseeable future. Here, Australia's dilemma on Taiwan is widely known. Further, the Labour Party's predisposition to exercise a more independent and even antagonistic foreign policy option vis-a-vis the US is known. Likewise, within the US-

Japan-India trilateral, it is also difficult to see India completely aligning its priorities with the US in view of their differences on global issues like world trade and investment, the environment, UN reforms, and Iran and the Gulf. More importantly, India has made no secret of its zeal for strategic autonomy, with an occasional surge of anti-American impulses – a sentiment which also intermittently surfaces in Japan.

The US therefore cannot afford to take Japan completely for granted. In addition to the relocation issues and Japan's opposition to Washington's removal of North Korea from the US State Department's list of 'state sponsors of terrorism', there is a tendency towards a greater strategic independence from the US. This is evident from the Democratic Party of Japan's (DPJ) rise to power, however briefly. Regardless of the political party in power, as budgetary constraints underlie defence cooperation, friction becomes inevitable. For instance, in 2009, there was speculation that Japan would fail in funding its part of joint missile development projects with the US owing to budgetary pressures.⁴⁶ In 2011, Brendon Taylor cited Michael Finnegan's conclusion that US-Japan alliance was a 'rhetorical facade', whose fragilities would ultimately be exposed in a crisis situation—for instance, over Taiwan or North Korea—potentially resulting in its complete breakdown.⁴⁷ While Japan's decision to loosen controls on arms exports and attempts to reinterpret the constitution might seem positive from the US strategic viewpoint, it is premature to form a decisive opinion on it, given Japan's strong militarist past. As a result, the US-Japan-India trilateral remains a weak formulation.

Besides the above trilaterals, most of which apparently range the US against China, there have also been trilaterals which include the two great powers in a single entity, namely, US-Japan-China and US-China-India.

On the first, the Second Armitage-Nye Report in 2007 had argued for coordination between the US and Japan in their approach to China, since strategic stability in East Asia greatly rested on positive atmospherics between the three.⁴⁸ Further, the idea of this trilateral was also advanced by several foreign policy experts including Yoichi Funabashi and Prof. Gerald L Curtis of Columbia University. The central argument has been that, as three of the strongest powers with the greatest capacity to bring about regional economic, political, and military stability, the three countries could best manage regional order in a trilateral understanding.⁴⁹ In fact, during the late

1990s, Japan's willingness to accept the strengthening of the extraordinary 1997 US-Japan Defence Guidelines had been conditional on the creation of a trilateral US-Japan-China dialogue as part of a larger Japanese strategy of managing both the US and China. Nonetheless it later showed up the US-Japan divide, since the dialogue was followed through only perfunctorily by the US unlike the Japanese, and underlines the futility of the exercise.⁵⁰

The 9/11 attacks provided the perfect opportunity for the three countries to cooperate on counter-terror and extend it to other spheres: piracy, maritime terrorism, and natural disasters. The opportunity was then actualised in joint operations against Somali pirates. Ironically, it was US-China cooperation on piracy in Somalia in 2008-09 which spurred Japan into despatching troops and even enacting a law for the purpose.⁵¹ Yet, Japan has made a more realistic assessment of China, explicitly mentioning China's activities in the East and South China Seas, a far cry from 2008 when the East Asian Strategic Review produced by Japan's National Institute for Defence Studies had lamented the lack of a strategic roadmap for constructing a stable US-China-Japan trilateral arrangement.⁵²

The fundamental contradiction inherent in this trilateral is that Japan cannot afford to be seen growing closer to either the US or China than it currently is; neither one will be happy about increased proximity to the other. Nor can Japan maintain equidistance from both, since the US will not accept such an equation. The recent attempt to 'normalise' its military through constitutional reinterpretation is precisely the endeavour to redress that situation. And the initiative to build a trilateral with Australia and India minus the US and China is an extension of that endeavour.

The US-China-India trilateral has not taken off despite the optimism of some experts as far back as the early 2000s.⁵³ Around the same time, other scholars had foreseen the relation between the three unfolding like a 'romantic triangle' in which each would be apprehensive of the closeness between the other two while also seeking to leverage the differences. In 2012, Chinese Assistant Foreign Minister Le Yucheng said that more dialogue "can lead to more understanding and more trust" between the three.⁵⁴ The same official, who is now China's Ambassador to India, repeated this in December 2014 at a conference on "Shaping the 21st century: India, the US and China" in Bangalore.⁵⁵ But India has its share of naysayers. Former National Security Adviser Shiv Shankar Menon, for example writes that, given the massive

power asymmetries between the three countries, “We are getting ahead of ourselves”.⁵⁶ Unlike the Australia-India-Japan trilateral, the US-China-India trilateral has not taken off at all.

Drawing on the above discussion, the following key inferences vis-a-vis the Australia-India-Japan trilateral can be distilled. First, the underlying US-China dyad (not necessarily a contradiction in all circumstances) drives most of these trilaterals. This is at once their biggest constraining factor and, remarkably, also the greatest strength of the Australia-India-Japan trilateral. The absence of both the US and China frees the trilateral of any great power machinations and prejudices apparently afflicting most other trilaterals. As Victor Cha writes, albeit in a multilateral context, “There is potential that any multilateral initiative by the great powers (read: US and China) will lead to a set of mutually reinforcing insecurity spirals”.⁵⁷ Further, the relative power symmetry places the AIJ trilateral onto a more positive trajectory as compared to the others fraught with inherent power asymmetry with the presence of either of the two great powers: US or China. Australia and Japan's middle-power standing sits comfortably with India's benign and responsible great power aspirations. Between themselves, the three do not have any territorial disputes of any kind. Critics might point towards the independent bilateral relations of each of the three – albeit with varying intensity and depth – with US and China. In the discussion above, notwithstanding their growing cooperation with the US with the Quadrilateral being the foremost example, it has already been expressed how substantive differences continue to hobble relations between each of the three and the US in their individual bilateral frameworks. The absence of US would make the trilateral more acceptable to China and many others who would be wary of US. Moreover, given the current spread of anti-Islamic sentiments, all three are likely to be more acceptable than, say the US, to Muslim-populated nations. The trilateral thus stands on firm ground even without the US.

A second inference is that the residual but long-standing trust-deficit burdened by history remains a disagreeable component of some of the key bilateral relationships among several of these trilaterals, namely, Japan-China, Japan-Korea, China-Korea, India-China, India-US and above all, US-China. In that respect, the Australia-India-Japan grouping comes off as a strong trilateral with none of the three constituent bilateral relationships carrying any historical baggage or prejudices.

Further, there is no causal relation between quality and the level of leadership in many of the above trilaterals and their desirable outcomes. For example, US-Japan-Korea trilateral has even met at defence minister's level but North Korea remains unresolved. Similarly, despite Australia-US-Japan trilateral having been institutionalised at a high level, the three countries have pursued widely different agendas. Then, China-Japan-Korea trilateral has even met at summit level, but has not progressed beyond non-traditional issues and remains weighed down by history. Even as the Australia-India-Japan trilateral has only met at official level, the strong leadership riding on personal chemistry between leaders, backed by generally positive public opinion, gives a clue to an effective trilateral.

Then there is the matter of time: Merely because a trilateral process has been ongoing for a long time does not necessarily herald its progress. One instance is of US-Japan-Korea trilateral which was informally initiated in 1992 but it is because of its lack of success on Korea that Six Party Talks had to be launched. Likewise, China-Japan-Korea trilateral has informally existed since 1997. And even the Australia-US-Japan trilateral has been in operation since 2002. The fledgling origin of the Australia-India-Japan trilateral thus cannot be a sustainable argument against its prospects.

Another inference is that most of these trilaterals have been reactive in their origin and not proactive. By its very nature, a reactive venture is usually narrow in focus and ad hoc in approach lurching from one crisis to another. For instance, US-Japan-Korea trilateral was in response to the then emerging nuclear crisis in the Korean peninsula. Then, the China-Japan-Korea trilateral had arisen after the 1997 Asian financial crisis. Even the Australia-US-Japan trilateral had come about as a consequence of the September 11 attacks. Unlike these trilaterals, the Australia-India-Japan initiative has been a proactive one, not put together hastily in response to a short-term emergency situation. There has been no precipitate crisis to trigger its conception. Surely, a strategic uncertainty has indeed pervaded the Indo-Pacific region given the steadily shifting power balance in a number of ways – from Atlantic and Pacific Oceans to Western Pacific and Indian Ocean, from Europe and the North Americas to Asia, and from US to China. Moreover, the perceptibly relative diminishing of US power projection capacities, China's relentless pursuit of 'gunboat diplomacy' on South and East China Seas while making steady inroads into the Indian Ocean, Japan's disposition to revise its

strategic culture, growing divergences between US and its allies, the rise of non-state actors and the faltering/inadequacies of multilateral institutions – are all in tandem engendering strategic uncertainties. Given such strategic fluidity stemming from unexpected developments all unfolding at the same time, the three countries have begun to proactively re-evaluate their options.

Therefore, as Asia's most powerful democracies with strong liberal foundations and a domestic political culture marked by free and fair elections, universal franchise, people's participation in governance, respect for human rights, free press and an independent judiciary, it is but natural for the three countries to proactively join forces with one another with a view to 'pre-empt' any strategic uncertainties. Although Japan has in recent years overtly pursued values-driven diplomacy, Australia and India alike find themselves naturally connected with those values and reciprocate in equal measure. On a visit to Japan as Gujarat Chief Minister in 2012, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had observed, "If Japan and India come together, I am sure it will strengthen their democratic values and human values".⁵⁸ Similarly, Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott on the occasion to mark the conclusion of Australia-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement with Japan had said, "We have a deep shared commitment to the universal aspirations of democracy, freedom and the rule of law". He further said, "And the relationship between Australia and Japan is much more than economics and trade and growing wealthy together. It's about respect, it's about values".⁵⁹ Speaking of economics and trade, Abe's book had alluded to Japan's traditional bifurcated policy of "separating politics and economics" (*seikei bunri*) as the guiding principle of Japan-China relationship,⁶⁰ a principle common to Australia and India in their policy approaches, particularly towards China. Internationally, even though the three may have on occasions trodden different paths – Australia's middle power activism on third world issues such as Colombo Plan and Commonwealth, India's leadership roles on non-alignment and decolonisation, and Japan's Overseas Development Assistance programmes (ODA) – the primacy of human values and respect for individual dignity form inherent underpinnings of each of these initiatives.

The upshot is that it is the strength of such foundational political-ideological roots that gives the trilateral between Australia, India and Japan such a solid promise despite its nascence. Perhaps no other combinations in a trilateral incarnation in Indo-Pacific brings in such formidable strength,

bound by deep political and human values, powerful political and public consensus, and most importantly, devoid of any major controversy –all of which make the Australia-India-Japan trilateral a first among equals.

STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

The three bilateral relationships within the Australia-India-Japan trilateral have been relatively longer in origin and possibly deeper in intensity, implying that the three have already cast a shadow on regional dynamics and strategic thinking in myriad ways. As the three unite on a common security platform, their capacity to exert influence on regional and global developments is decidedly multiplying further. In the immediate context, the overriding implication is that the US and China between themselves would behave with more restraint and avoid militant hostility. If anything, at least the trilateral would raise the 'diplomatic costs' of confrontational behaviour for both the big powers.

IMPLICATIONS ON THE US AND THE BROADER REGION

At first glance, while the US might encourage, albeit discreetly, two of its closest allies rallying together with India, it would also be wary of the trilateral materialising and possibly *succeeding* eventually. The US might have taken a more favourable view of this trilateral at the initial stages of the 'pivot' policy in 2011, seeing it as an offshoot of the larger US strategic design and architecture (read: quadrilateral). But in view of the pivot itself being a non-starter by most accounts, the US may have concerns about Australia, Japan and India banding together to US' exclusion. Given that the Obama administration is failing to face up to the tests of gunboat diplomacy by China and thereby unravelling the pivot, the US would rationalise and link the realisation of the Australia-India-Japan trilateral to that same failure. In that context, the latent differences between the US and its 'two anchors' described earlier (under US-Japan-India trilateral) may become more pronounced. The civil nuclear deal with India is yet to be operationalised fully, notwithstanding the January 2015 visit of Obama, which ironed out nuclear liability issues. India is treading cautiously: when the US offered 17 transformative military technologies under the Defence Trade and Technology Initiative (DTTI), it

chose to go ahead with only two of them. India's dithering on the Logistics Support Agreement (LSA) and a few other issues⁶¹ for fear of bartering its strategic autonomy, underlines the distrust that continues to characterise their security relationship.

In such an environment, the US would be forced to upgrade its existing and emerging bilateral relations while strengthening the other trilaterals, including those which again include any one of the AIJ in a combination with others, such as Korea or newfound security partners in Southeast Asia, namely, Vietnam (US-Vietnam-Japan). Over the years, US strategic balancing has constituted a diversification of its web of alliances in Southeast and East Asia to embrace hitherto 'ideologically distant' powers including Indonesia and Vietnam and politically-sensitive Malaysia in a security relationship, apart from bolstering erstwhile arrangements with the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore and South Korea. The US would also be taking note of the non-participation of Thailand and the Philippines, US' treaty allies, and Indonesia, in the ongoing Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) process, the economic component of the pivot, a secretive trading bloc widely projected as rivalling the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) led by ASEAN and China. As the Obama administration navigates domestic and foreign opposition to the TPP, it would also care not to overlook that Australia, India and even Korea are all part of the RCEP process.

Another source of discomfiture for the US would be the decision of both Australia and India to join the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Although Japan has not joined, substantial sections of Japanese people including politicians, bureaucrats and business circles are calling for it to join the organisation. Till June 2015, Japan had kept its options open, linking its possible membership to addressing of governance and corruption issues.⁶² The influential *Japan Times* in an editorial advised that it was better for Japan to address the questions of governance and lending standards from within than by staying outside.⁶³ Yet all things considered, the recent reports of the US economy staging a recovery, coupled with the prospect of a new president in 2016, it is likely that the strategic thrust of the US pivot would be revitalised and China's latitude for unilateralism in East Asia curtailed.

IMPLICATIONS ON CHINA AND THE BROADER REGION

For China, it could well be alarmed at the coming together of two of the US' closest allies and one with which the US has a fast-growing security relationship. But a closer inspection suggests otherwise – for the same reasons that the US would find the trilateral disagreeable. The prospect of the slightest difference in strategic outlook between the US and two of its closest treaty allies would constitute a favourable environment for China; the rising superpower would certainly harness the situation to its advantage.

In addition to the growing economic leverage that China enjoys with the three countries, it has undertaken initiatives to improve bilateral relations with each of them. Its 17th Defence Strategic Dialogue with Australia was held in December 2014. China-Australia bilateral security relations have certainly taken huge strides since 1994 when the Dialogue began, indeed since 2008, when it was upgraded to the level of Defence Secretary and Chief of Defence Forces. Mutual visits and exchanges of defence personnel at the highest levels have given further impetus to their bilateral security dynamics, as have military educational exchanges, port calls by respective warships, and the conduct of joint military exercises (lately for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief).

China has also attempted to refine its defence understanding with India, steering the broader relationship to a positive direction, yet simultaneously carrying out occasional border incursions, expanding military footmarks in the Indian Ocean, and even contesting India's territorial sovereignty through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project, a part of Silk Road project through Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK). After the Mahinda Rajapaksa government's replacement by M. Sirisena in Sri Lanka in March 2015, a geopolitically favourable development from India's perspective, Xi Jinping even spoke of a trilateral between India, China and Sri Lanka to address Indian concerns over the Maritime Silk Route in the wake of Chinese submarines docking in Sri Lanka.⁶⁴

Formally, China conducted its 18th round of talks on the land boundary dispute in March 2015. With respect to immediate flashpoints, the April 2015 Defence Dialogue –the seventh between the two countries – included four emergency points of interaction between border personnel in Ladakh: the Track Junction, Panging Tso Lake, Demchok and Chumar.⁶⁵ Significantly, for

the first time, China is set to send PLAN vessels and representatives to the Indian International Fleet Review to be hosted by India at Visakhapatnam in February 2016.⁶⁶ Therefore, China has sought to reduce the trust deficit by intensifying its security engagement with India. Further, both are part of BRICS. Again, India (along with Pakistan) recently joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which revives the possibility of a Russia-India-China trilateral, is another source of strategic anxiety for the US.⁶⁷

As regards China-Japan's defence relations, it was Abe, prime mover behind the Australia-India-Japan trilateral, who normalised the relationship with an ice-breaking visit in 2006. It has already been pointed out how Abe had sought to strike a balance between Australia and China. Broadly speaking, given the overhang of history, security relations between Japan and China have been on a roller coaster. When relations worsened following Japan's nationalisation of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in 2012, the four-point consensus struck between the Chinese State Councillor and the Japanese National Security Chief in December 2014, was an endeavour to improve the relationship. In March 2015, the deputy foreign ministers of the two countries met after a gap of four years for a bilateral security dialogue, but once again the long-discussed Maritime Cooperation Mechanism failed to materialise even as the two sides agreed to continue the dialogue. The decision to convene a Japan-China-Korea trilateral soon after the bilateral, however, is a positive trend, albeit a modest one.

What is more noteworthy is that it is mostly Japan and not China which is pushing for a thaw between the two. For instance, in 2014, on the sidelines of the APEC summit, a meeting of China's foreign and commerce ministers with their Japanese counterparts took place following a request from Japan.⁶⁸ Likewise, backchannel deliberations by Japanese diplomats facilitated the handshake between Abe and Xi at the same venue last year.⁶⁹ What it shows is that Japan is not getting the same friendly treatment from China that Australia and India are. Historical antipathy lingers.

Japan's progressive enactment of a series of legislations – the latest being the right to collective defence – steadily chipping away at its pacifist constitution to play a more 'normal' security role is bound to be a concern for China, although a comfort for Australia, India and possibly the US (at least initially). The risk, however, is the extent to which Japan 'normalises'. The spectre of it relapsing into its militarist past and even treading the nuclear

path cannot be altogether discounted. In July 2015, the Lower House of Japan passed two security bills taking the first legal steps towards Japan's right to collective defence. The Abe government may well reprise them in the Upper House, since there is no iron-clad guarantee that the bills will be supported by the people in a referendum. Ironically, Japan has been confronted with the policy predicament of having to strike a more 'realist' militarist posture at a time when its capacity to absorb costs is progressively diminishing.

Inspired by the US, China is also striving to upgrade its security relations with some ASEAN countries, though the steps taken have been largely limited to relatively soft, non-traditional issues. Significantly, given that multilateral settings such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) have been 'neutralised' by the entry of the US, there have been attempts by Beijing to promote alternative multilateral regional groupings such as Conference on Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA)⁷⁰ rivalling ASEAN and EAS, and to advance ideas such as the new Asian Security Concept. The proposed 'One Belt One Road' project, though couched in innocuous Silk Road terminology, is essentially a security exercise through economic and infrastructural partnerships.⁷¹ Significantly, at China's victory parade in commemoration of the end of the Second World War in early September 2015, South Korean President Park Geun-hye was a notable attendee with Australia and India sending junior ministerial representatives. Japan and the US did not attend.

Eventually, this trilateral cannot only be good for the region but also a blessing in disguise for China itself. If left unopposed, China may well go too far, which could lead the US to make a full-might final intervention against increasingly aggressive Chinese postures in the South China Sea. Both the US and China know that the former's military superiority is short-lived. The former might even want to go for a war sooner than later to establish its supremacy, a prospect which may force the Chinese Communist Party to undertake a course correction.

CONCLUSION


Although the trilateral process between the three countries appears to be driven by the energy levels of, and personal rapport between, their three leaders, the reality is that their respective bilateral strategic dynamics have

been at play for some years now and their interactions have transcended political divides validating a bipartisan consensus. Given that the shaping of each of their political cultures has for decades been wedded to a common political-ideological and democratic ethos, as well as universal human values, the recent highlighting of those values gives an immediate thrust to the evolving cooperative framework, while not taking away the long-standing nature of this commonality. Of the five conditions⁷² for states to cooperate as prescribed by Prof J.D.B. Miller mentioned at the beginning of this paper, except for perhaps similarity of cultural background, the three countries have covered enough ground – with the strategic circumstances having matured enough over the years – for them to forge a politically viable cooperative security framework. In fact, the dissimilarity of cultural background can well be compensated for or even equated with those shared values. True, the same values could also apply to the US and possibly other countries such as South Korea and New Zealand. But enough has been cited earlier to show how the presence of a big power in an alliance can complicate matters. Thus, to treat the trilateral as just another offshoot of great power strategic design would be to misread the situation and to undermine the wisdom and foreign policy autonomy of the three countries, especially Australia and Japan. The trilateral sans a big power is a testament to the independence of Australian and Japanese foreign policies.

Australia continues to grapple with the security versus commerce dilemma, which translates into a US versus China dilemma. Against this backdrop, and more so in the light of other regional multilateral frameworks largely faltering, as well as increasing question marks about the US pivot as indeed its strategic capacity, its trilateral with Japan and India is one way to address the situation. Likewise, for Japan, the trilateral is not merely an expression of assertion of policy independence vis-a-vis US, but also an alternative opening, consistent with its effort at 'normalising' into a regular sovereign military power. Similarly India, whose strategic autonomy has remained the inviolable cornerstone of its foreign policy, has entered the trilateral to recalibrate its security policy to the emerging imperatives in the Indian Ocean, as also to diversify its erstwhile options. The Modi government with a strong majority has still got more than three years in power and India could become the prime agent for taking this trilateral process forward. Abe will also remain in power until the 2018-end general elections. Though

Australia goes to the polls in 2016 (or even earlier, according to newspaper reports) it is unlikely that a change in government would adversely impact the trilateral. Rather, a Labour win could give an impetus to the trilateral, given the absence of the US in it.

While the first trilateral met at the level of senior officials, as things proceed, this is certainly likely to be upgraded to higher levels. Australia and Japan already conduct a strategic dialogue with each other and with the US at the 2+2 (foreign minister and defence minister) level; India conducts 2+2 meetings of foreign and defence secretaries with Japan, and a '1.5 track' dialogue with Australia involving both government and non-government representatives. Even as the first trilateral discussed issues such as maritime security, freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and trilateral maritime cooperation in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, a shift to embracing subjects like coastguard cooperation, joint exercises and joint training is a real possibility. (There are already maritime cooperation programmes between the three countries in a larger multilateral or bilateral format.) That India is contemplating buying Japan's US-2 amphibious patrol aircraft, or the fact that Australia has an eye on Japanese submarine technology, is a sign of strong defence cooperation between the three. Perhaps it may even lead to Japan changing its stance following Australia's position on India's civilian nuclear programme. In such a converging strategic environment, it is only a matter of time before 'two plus two plus two' level meetings (foreign ministers, defence ministers and even heads-of-government) become a regular feature among the three countries.

In an era of heightened strategic uncertainty in the new century, when *Pax Americana* is increasingly receding and *Pax Sinica* is an ominous but amorphous prospect, the entry barriers to formations such as the Australia-India-Japan trilateral fall further. As countries push the envelope of strategic cooperation among one another, it is only inevitable that a close security trilateral comprising Australia, India and Japan comes to fruition. In his speech in 2007, Pranab Mukherjee, then foreign minister and now President of India had advised in the context of regional security arrangements, "What the world needs, then, is not old style balance of power but a well-crafted system to promote a 'balance of interests' among the major powers". The trilateral between the three is a manifestation of that idea of a balance of interests.⁷³ 

ENDNOTES:

1. JDB Miller, "The Conditions for Co-operation", in *India, Japan, Australia: Partners in Asia*, (ed.) JDB Miller (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1968), 195.
2. The Conference with the trilateral theme was held in Sep. 1967 at Australian National University where academics from the three countries presented papers on the subject which were subsequently aggregated in a volume titled *India, Japan, Australia: Partners in Asia* (ed.) JDB Miller (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1968).
3. Miller, "The Conditions for Cooperation," 195.
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