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Session I:
US-centered triangles: US – Japan – Australia

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US-centered triangles: US-Japan-Australia

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In the decade and a half since its establishment in 2002, the US-Japan-Australia Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD) has developed into the most substantial of the plethora of trilateral security groupings that have emerged in the Indo-Pacific region following the Cold War. After briefly outlining the origins and scope of US-Japan-Australia trilateral strategic cooperation, this paper examines its main drivers, how it relates to the region's traditional bilateral alliance structure and the mosaic of Asian regional security institutions, and its prospects under the Trump administration.

Origins, scope and accomplishments

In establishing the TSD, US, Japanese and Australian policymakers had different but overlapping policy objectives. The administration of President George W. Bush was committed to strengthening traditional US alliances in Asia, with an eye to a rising China. It sought Australian support in encouraging Japan to adopt a more active security posture and was also eager to strengthen the weaker Japan-Australia leg of the strategic triad. Japan, like Australia, was anxious about the prospect of US disengagement from the region following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Bush administration's military engagements in the Middle East. Both countries were seeking to lock the United States into regional structures to manage China's growing power. The Howard government saw the TSD as an element of its broader push to revitalize Australia's alliance with the United States, and with it, the wider US alliance network in Asia. Additionally, Howard sought to develop a genuine strategic partnership with Japan, complementing the two countries' deep economic and diplomatic ties.

The TSD met at the vice-ministerial level from 2002 before being upgraded to ministerial level in 2006, and leaders have met twice (in 2007 and 2014, both times in Australia). The foreign ministry-led TSD was augmented by a trilateral Security and Defense Cooperation Forum in 2007, and both mechanisms are supported by a series of working groups covering different areas of cooperation. TSD foreign ministers have met seven times, and defense ministers six times. Unlike some other trilateral groupings (eg. the US-Japan-South Korea Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group), the evolution of the TSD has not been interrupted by shifts in domestic

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politics or policy priorities among its participants, continuing despite changes of government in all three countries.

With its development marked more by steady progress than spectacular breakthroughs, the TSD has nonetheless become a useful mechanism for:

- coordinating policy positions on regional issues such as North Korea and the South China Sea, and the three countries' respective efforts to build maritime capacity and counter China's growing influence in Southeast Asia;
- driving deeper three-way strategic cooperation in areas including defense, security, intelligence, development assistance and humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HADR);
- fostering stronger defense and security ties between Japan and Australia; and
- providing the Japanese and Australian governments with a valuable avenue to influence US policies towards the region.

Current trilateral defense cooperation focuses heavily on combined exercises, particularly in the maritime domain, and the United States, Japan and Australia are increasing the frequency, scale and sophistication of three-way exercises. These included a trilateral naval passing exercise in April 2016 at the conclusion of Exercise Komodo (between Padang, Indonesia, and Singapore) and, for the first time, an amphibious training scenario at the June 2016 RIMPAC Exercise (Japan and Australia are both establishing their own amphibious capabilities). In October 2016, the United States, Japan and Australia signed a Trilateral Information Sharing Arrangement (TISA) to facilitate sharing of classified information on three-way defense operations and exercises. In January 2017, Japan and Australia signed an enhanced Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA), updating the ACSA signed by the two countries in 2010 and now allowing the exchange not only of food, fuel and other supplies but also ammunition during exercises, relief operations and peacekeeping operations. US, Japanese and Australian defense ministers met in June 2017 and foreign ministers in August 2017, issuing detailed joint statements after both meetings.

Much of this cooperation is functional in nature, and the TSD is not a formal tripartite alliance — there is no collective security commitment. Yet it will be apparent, even from this brief survey, that significant institutionalization of US-Japan-Australia defense and security continues to occur within the TSD framework, giving rise to several related questions:

- What are the main drivers of US-Japan-Australia strategic cooperation, and how does the TSD add value to the United States' traditional "hub and spokes" bilateral alliance structure in the region?
- Does the TSD strengthen or weaken existing multilateral institutions in the region?
- Does it contribute to regional (and global) prosperity and stability?

The remainder of this paper attempts to answer these questions from a US perspective, before closing with some thoughts on the prospects for the TSD during the Trump administration.

Drivers of US-Japan-Australia trilateral strategic cooperation

The first, and perhaps most significant driver of the TSD and other US-centered trilateral groupings in the Indo-Pacific region is the realization in Washington and other allied capitals that the early-1950s architecture of bilateral alliances is necessary but insufficient in the face of rising transregional security threats including North Korea's accelerating missile and nuclear programs, global Islamist terrorism and China's increasing assertiveness in the Western Pacific. Together, these problems — each of which is separately becoming more potent and complex — are quantitatively and qualitatively becoming too much for any one regional power (even a superpower such as the United States) or any one bilateral alliance to manage. This is particularly so at a time when US and allied resources are constrained by domestic economic challenges, including ageing populations.

In this context, one important normative function of the TSD (and other US-centered trilateral arrangements) is to coordinate policy positions, leveraging shared values and interests in order to achieve greater positive effect on regional security.[2] For example, the US-Japan-Australia Trilateral Defense Ministers' meeting in June 2017 expressed strong opposition to the use of force by China to alter the status quo in the South and East China Seas, as well as attempts to militarize disputed features, as did foreign ministers in August 2017. The three governments have used the TSD to coordinate similarly strong statements in response to North Korean actions.

A second, and increasingly important, TSD function is to boost collective capabilities and capacity, contributing to regional balancing and deterrence. The balance of military power in Asia is shifting against the United States, and the threats

[2] See William Tow, "The Trilateral Strategic Dialogue: Facilitating Community-Building or Revisiting Containment?", *NBR Special Report,* December 2008.

outlined above are stretching the constrained resources of the United States and its allies. (Keeping tabs on China's numerically and geographically expanding maritime presence across the region is already stretching the US Navy and its allied counterparts.[3]) The only cost-effective way to remedy the ensuing gaps in capability and capacity in key areas such as intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), amphibious lift, missile defense and undersea warfare is to develop greater interoperability — and ultimately integration — among US and allied military forces. In addition to providing reassurance to US allies (itself a benefit to the United States), deepened trilateral strategic cooperation signals to China that more forceful efforts on its part to overturn the regional security order risk triggering more formal collective security arrangements among Asia's powerful maritime democracies.[4]

US-Japan-Australia trilateral defense cooperation is key in this regard, for two reasons. The first is that Japan and Australia are the United States' two most capable and dependable allies in the region. They are longstanding economic and diplomatic partners who have been steadily building their own substantial bilateral strategic relationship over the past decade. Both have made serious long-term commitments to investing in and sustaining advanced military capabilities and high levels of interoperability with US military forces. Each has demonstrated the ability to add real value to US-led coalition operations in the region: Japan in areas such as anti-submarine warfare and missile defense, and Australia in air combat, ISR and special forces operations. As noted above, both are also developing amphibious capabilities which could usefully augment the US Marine Corps presence in the region, as well as enhancing their capacity to provide mutual logistical support and share intelligence.

The region's strategic geography is the second key reason for the increasing importance of the US-Japan-Australia trilateral. Following the shock of North Korea's invasion of the South in 1950, US strategy in Asia was built on an interlocking network of alliances to defend the offshore island chain running from the Aleutians through Japan, the Ryukus, and the Philippines to Australia and New Zealand using principally naval and air power — an ambitious strategic initiative conceived by John Foster Dulles as a westward extension of the Monroe Doctrine, with the defense of Japan and the Ryukus at its heart. Today, in an era when long-range missiles, sophisticated cyber-attacks and nuclear weapons are proliferating — and when North Korea and China are both pursuing strategies intended to weaken and decouple US

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3 For details see Andrew Shearer, *Australia-Japan-U.S. Maritime Cooperation: Creating Federated Capabilities for the Asia Pacific*, Center for Strategic & International Studies, April 4, 2016.

4 See Michael J. Green, "Strategic Asian Triangles", in *The Oxford Handbook of the International Relations of Asia*, eds. Saadia Pekkanen, John Ravenhill, and Rosemary Foot, October 2014, 39.5.

alliances in the region — defense of the island chain is as important as ever. Japan remains the keystone of security in Asia, while Australia's importance as the "southern anchor" is growing because it sits astride critical chokepoints between the Pacific and Indian Oceans and offers access to US air and maritime forces beyond the range of many (but not all) Chinese long-range missiles.

Implications for Indo-Pacific multilateral institutions, and for regional prosperity and stability

Another key reason for the emergence of the TSD and other US-centered trilateral arrangements in Asia is the immaturity and weakness of multilateral security institutions in the region, certainly relative to the institutions in Europe. The East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting "Plus" are not without utility. But little consensus exists in the region regarding the norms, rules and membership criteria that should guide the development of its security architecture, and China shows little sign of accepting the "constraints" of ASEAN-centered multilateralism.[5] Structural weaknesses in multilateral forums such as the ASEAN Regional Forum have created a role for minilateral groupings such as the TSD in shaping security outcomes and architecture in Asia, contributing security "public goods" and ultimately making multilateral institutions more effective while minimizing the risks of a security dilemma.[6] In this sense, the TSD and other trilateral groupings are net contributors to security, stability and prosperity in the Indo Pacific.

Conclusion: Prospects under the Trump administration

Following North Korea's sixth and most powerful nuclear test on September 2 and the gathering crisis over Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs, the US-South Korea-Japan trilateral will be in the spotlight, playing a potentially crucial role from crisis coordination and management, to building more robust integrated regional missile defenses. Trilateral groupings including the TSD can also help to reassure regional allied governments anxious not only about the existential threat posed by North Korea and the long-term challenge from China, but also regarding the United States' commitment to its treaty allies and to the region more broadly under the Trump

5 See Michael J. Green and Bates Gill, "Unbundling Asia's New Multilateralism", in *Asia's New Multilateralism: Cooperation, Competition, and the Search for Community*, edited by Michael J. Green and Bates Gill, New York, Columbia University Press, 2009, 1-30.

6 See Green, 2014, 39.1.

administration — in light of the President's campaign rhetoric and longstanding skepticism about alliances. (Trump's protectionism has deepened these misgivings: the nuclear test coincided with media reports that the administration is contemplating withdrawal from the South Korea-US free trade agreement, KORUS.)

In light of these concerning trends in US Asia policy, the TSD can likewise serve a valuable bridging role. Washington can use the trilateral as part of a coordinated strategy to increase diplomatic, economic and military pressure on North Korea (and also to influence China). For their part, Japan and Australia can work together through the TSD to build relationships and influence with the Trump administration — particularly with sympathetic figures such as Secretary of Defense Mattis and Secretary of State Tillerson — and thereby shape US policies towards the region, including by urging American restraint if necessary.[7]

[7] See also Andrew Shearer, "U.S.-Japan-Australia Strategic Cooperation in the Trump Era: Moving from Aspiration to Action", in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2017*, ISEAS Publishing, 2017, 83-89.