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

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## Australia-Japan-US Trilateral: A Perspective from Australia

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My general starting point on trilaterals is one of skepticism. That is not to say they do not have potential. The trilateral format makes good theoretical sense as “variable geometry” in between the bilateral and multilateral interfaces. It promises a Goldilocks formula that is neither too big, nor too small.

For small and middle powers trilaterals suggest a means to creatively magnify their influence beyond the institutionalized interface of alliance with a great power, without risking “abandonment”. From the great power side of the ledger, trilateral mechanisms hold out corresponding promise, as a means to stimulate cross-bracing relations between allies and partners, especially those whose strategic field of view has shrunk to “alliance management”. Washington has invested in the trilateral format because it offers an escape from the straitjacket of a purely bilateral approach. It also encourages burden sharing and inter-operability along a wider axis.

I understand these attractions in theory, but am skeptical on empirical grounds, as the record of tangible outcomes from the trilateral format across the Indo-Pacific is not obvious, despite the investment of diplomatic capital from governments, and intellectual curiosity at forums such as this. I am particularly skeptical of investing too much attention on the format of international security cooperation, while neglecting the impact on specific issues.

Such treatment of Asia’s regional “architecture” risks a overly reductive approach, distracted by a quest for the mystical integer of regional security. How else to explain the mystical attractions of the (Australia-India-Japan-US) Quad? Trilaterals can easily be invested with a symbolism and value greater than the sum of their parts. This is not unique to security studies. Consider the faddish obsession with regional economic “growth triangles”<sup>2</sup>. Academic observers need to be particularly on guard not to over-value form over substance.

In spite of their potential attractions to greater and lesser powers, the return on investment from trilateral security cooperation in Asia is not yet obvious. While it is common for the two long sides of the triangle to connect back to the US, it is rare to find cases of equilateral security trilaterals in the region. If the Australia-US-Japan threesome is the region’s most evolved example, it remains an isosceles triangle with

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<sup>2</sup> Sarah Y Tong and Catherine Chong Siew Keng, *ASEAN Economic Growth Triangles and Implications for China in China-Asian Sub-Regional Cooperation: Progress, Problems and Prospect*, ed. Li Mingjiang, 2011.

the narrower base running between Australia and Japan. Efforts to sustain security trilaterals have been much less successful in other contexts, with the inter-ally link frequently failing the stress test in the US-Japan-South Korea example. Japan and South Korea have just started to share intelligence directly on North Korea, despite it being manifestly in their mutual interest to do so. Attempts to put a basic framework into place date back over five years.<sup>3</sup>

Not all trilaterals have to involve the US, of course. Australia has convened a foreign ministry-led three-way dialogue with Japan and India since June 2015.<sup>4</sup> All three are close security partners or allies of the United States, but cooperation and communication amongst them should not be mistaken for inchoate coalition building, even though it has that potential. An Australia Track 1.5 dialogue with India and France is in the offing. The Australia-India-Indonesia is another stop-start variation on the trilateral theme. Sometimes there are benefits to sharing threat perceptions and comparing notes without the US itself being present. That is understandable. But for more cautious parties, the strategic aims for trilateralism do not extend much further.

One explanation for the underperformance of security trilaterals is that the pull of the US alliance system has simply been too strong, at least until recently. The US may have worked against its own long-term interests in burden sharing in this sense. Another factor is the recessed nature of China's challenge to the US-backed "rules-based order". Chipping away at the status quo below the threshold of armed conflict while accompanying this with economic incentives has proved an effective *modus operandi* for China. States in the region have not felt pressure to commit to irrevocable strategic choices, because there has been no full-blown security crisis requiring them to "choose sides", allowing hedging behavior to prevail. America's adversaries in Asia are now asking a harder set of questions, however. North Korea's rapid progress towards an operational long-range nuclear and missile capability has sparked concerns about the "de-coupling" of Washington's key Northeast Asian alliances in Japan and South Korea.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Jaehan Park and Sangyoung Yun, Korea and Japan's Military Information Agreement: A Final Touch for the Pivot? *The Diplomat*, 24 November 2016: <https://thediplomat.com/2016/11/korea-and-japans-military-information-agreement-a-final-touch-for-the-pivot/>.

<sup>4</sup> Ian Hall, The Australia-India-Japan trilateral: converging interests... and converging perceptions? <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/australia%C2%AD%C2%AD-india-japan-trilateral-converging-interests-converging-perceptions/>, 17 March 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Ben Rimland, 'North Korea: Decoupling the U.S.-Japan Alliance', *Tokyo Review*, 5 September 2017: <http://www.tokyoreview.net/2017/09/north-korea-us-japan-alliance/>.

In Asia's "strategic holding pattern", as Australia's Foreign Minister Julie Bishop has termed it<sup>6</sup>, it pays to keep one's options and channels of communication open via the most accessible geometry possible. Hence the multi-vectored approach of Indonesia's "thousand friends, zero enemies" foreign policy.<sup>7</sup> In this promiscuous environment ASEAN, as an institution, has adopted a death-by-dialogue approach. Most regional states, especially in Southeast Asia, have hedged, while some have band-wagoned with the emerging power, China. Trilaterals have tended to gain from the fading expectations of ASEAN-led multilateral diplomacy leading to strategically meaningful security cooperation.

Cases of open defection from the US alliance system are rare. Even among the neutrals, clear-cut band-wagoning behavior, as seen with Cambodia's pliant diplomatic position over the South China Sea disputes in recent years, is exceptional. Among the US hub-and-spoke alliances in Asia Pacific, the Philippines under Duterte is perhaps the closest we have seen to a case of outright "defection". Yet beyond the anti-US rhetoric of President Duterte, and his foreign ministers' equivocation towards the South China Sea, the situation remains fluid, as demonstrated by deepening security cooperation between the Philippines, Japan and Australia (along separate strands, until now, but could this even be considered another potential trilateral framework among US Pacific allies?). Working-level defense ties between the Philippines and US armed forces have also been maintained without significant change, and have even revived since the siege of Marawi City in Mindanao.

If trilateral security cooperation has under-delivered to this point, the true test of its potential will come only once confidence starts to ebb in America's status as the region's ultimate guarantor. How close are we to this point? Hugh White has been consistently ahead of the pack in expounding a narrative of incipient US strategic decline<sup>8</sup>. The "declinist" position is still considered unorthodox, but has gathered steam since Trump's election. Are we experiencing a temporary dip in credibility associated with the policy inconsistencies of the Trump administration, or something more fundamental? The Trump administration's approach towards US alliances and trans-Pacific security commitments has been steady, compared with the strain imposed on trans-Atlantic relations. This has surprised many, given Trump's long-standing anti-Japanese rhetoric. Despite inconsistent policy and friction in other policy areas, like trade, senior Trump administration figures including the Vice

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<sup>6</sup> Julie Bishop, "Change and uncertainty in the Indo-Pacific: Strategic challenges and opportunities", 28th IISS Fullerton Lecture, Singapore, 13 March 2017: [http://foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/Pages/2017/jb\\_sp\\_170313a.aspx](http://foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/Pages/2017/jb_sp_170313a.aspx).

<sup>7</sup> <http://jakartaglobe.id/news/thousand-friends-policy-retno/>.

<sup>8</sup> Is US decline Good News for China? <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/06/18/is-a-u-s-decline-good-news-for-china/>.

President, and sometimes the President himself, have sought to reaffirm Washington's "iron-clad" security commitment to its key Asian allies, Seoul, Tokyo and Canberra.

There is no evidence as yet of any fundamental questioning of the US alliance among these three key treaty allies. But doubts among the allies and partners go beyond questions of short-term commitment or personality. Questions center more on the long-term sustainability of the US presence in Asia, and hinge on a broader spectrum of power measures than military capability, including political will to exert leadership, and to actively pursue international economic engagement in a protectionist and populist domestic political environment.

Equally, there are doubts about China's growth model and its ability to attract other countries in support of an alternative to the US-led "rules-based order". Will concerns about US decline and China's hegemonic behavior motivate countries like Japan and Australia to pursue intra-regional security links more vigorously, evening up the sides of their trilateral with the US? Or is "band-wagoning" with China the more likely course?

Skepticism aside, there is much that Australia, Japan and the United States can do trilaterally. If the trilateral prompts a revived quadrilateral structure, with India's admission, that would be optimal from the viewpoint of maintaining a balance of power. But momentum should not have to rest with US. And there is no good reason why trilateral inertia should delay Australia and Japan from doing more bilaterally. As I've written previously, the bilateral defense relationship is currently underdone, based on the conservative objectives of an upgraded Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement, and enhanced access for visiting military forces.<sup>9</sup>

So here are some practical suggestions for greater Australia-Japan defense cooperation, with read-across to the trilateral agenda:

I was recently invited to observe a joint Australian Defence Force (ADF)-US Marine Corps (USMC) Humanitarian and Disaster Relief exercise in the Northern Territory. Japan was one of the observer nations represented. The US Marines and the ADF already participate in a trilateral exercise with Japan's Self Defence Forces, Southern Jackeroo. Japan upped its participation in this year's Talisman Sabre exercise to include GSDF Airborne troops, who interacted with non-US participants more freely and on a bigger scale than in 2015. Amphibious activities are particularly suited to building up trilateral ties and capabilities, because they rely on strong and

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<sup>9</sup> Euan Graham, 'Missed opportunities at the Australia-Japan summit', *The Interpreter*, 16 January 2017: <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/missed-opportunities-australia-japan-summit>.

sustained inter-service cooperation, at both the national and international level.<sup>10</sup> Sending a real Japanese amphibious task force to participate in the 2019 iteration of Talisman Sabre would be an appropriate step up in three-way defense cooperation.

Anti-submarine warfare (ASW) is another obvious partnership area. Japan's vast postwar experience in ASW with the Maritime Self Defence Force (MSDF) would make it a natural mentor activity with the Royal Australian Navy as it re-masters and re-invests heavily in this capability, with nine new frigates in the pipeline.<sup>11</sup>

Australia already participates in the Cope North exercise with Japanese and US air forces.<sup>12</sup> Japan's SDF and the ADF should make full use of Guam, as an approximate midway location that is also US territory. That would mean lower costs and less time in transit for scarce defense assets and personnel.

Distance is still an inhibiting factor in Japan-Australia defense cooperation, notwithstanding RIMPAC, Nichigo Trident and naval exercises that have seen submarines recently deploy in both directions. Australia's role within the UN Command-Rear Headquarters (UNC-R), although specifically mandated for contingencies in Korea, is still relevant to the Australia-Japan-US trilateral agenda<sup>13</sup>. The UNC Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) gives Australia, as a "sending state" limited access to six UN bases in Japan, including Yokota Air Base, where Australia currently commands UNC-R. Deploying Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) enabler capabilities – Airborne Electronic Warfare (AEW), long-range transport and refueling – more regularly to Japan would be timely in the current climate of strategic attention on North Korea. It would also enable the RAAF and Japan's Air Self Defence Force (ASDF) to train together more habitually, and to potentially pursue joint training on the F-35 in future. The 2017 Australia-Japan "2+2" mentioned looking at establishing a joint activity in 2018, in Japan, involving fighter jets from both nations.<sup>14</sup>

Military integration between the ADF and SDF could be promoted, at low cost, by posting liaison officers in the services, starting with a GSDF liaison officer attached to the Australian Army's newly amphibious-capable units. The US is already well integrated with Japan and Australia in both directions.

The naval dimension is already the thickest strand of inter-service defense cooperation. However, the South China Sea is increasingly difficult as a joint or trilateral operating area, because China's presence there is already so dense. Despite

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<sup>10</sup> Benjamin Schreer, Japan's Emerging Amphibious Capability, ASPI Strategist, 3 June 2013: <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/japans-emerging-amphibious-capability/>

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.defence.gov.au/casg/EquippingDefence/SEA5000PH1\\_FutureFrigates](http://www.defence.gov.au/casg/EquippingDefence/SEA5000PH1_FutureFrigates)

<sup>12</sup> Australian Department of Defence: <http://www.defence.gov.au/Exercises/CopeNorthGuam/>

<sup>13</sup> "The United Nations Command (Rear) change of Command", Yokota Air Base News, 31 January 2016: <http://www.yokota.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/773824/the-united-nations-command-rear-change-of-command/>.

<sup>14</sup> [https://foreignminister.gov.au/releases/Pages/2017/jb\\_mr\\_170420.aspx](https://foreignminister.gov.au/releases/Pages/2017/jb_mr_170420.aspx).

some significant recent interactions between the US and Japanese navies in the South China Sea, including Japan's largest ship, JDS Izumo, Tokyo is still reluctant to commit much beyond a symbolic level, because China can surge a maritime presence in the sea areas close to Japan.<sup>15</sup> Australia has been reluctant to undertake US freedom of navigation patrols in the South China Sea for different reasons, though the two navies have recently participated in presence patrols with the US, Canadian and New Zealand navies.

In conclusion, trilateral security cooperation among the US and its regional security partners in Asia will never supplant the US alliance network, for as long as it remains in place. But it can usefully supplement it. While there are considerable grounds for scepticism about how far security trilateralism has delivered on its theoretical promise to date, the real strategic test of potential for the US-Japan-Australia trilateral is only beginning now.

Whatever uncertainties there are about the Trump administration's commitment to military alliances, the three-way relationship with Tokyo and Canberra should continue to be viewed by the United States as a means to promote interaction and to defence efforts between its two most important Western Pacific partners. But US leadership can no longer be presumed. The Australia-Japan-US trilateral also serves the allies' corresponding interest in keeping a more sceptical US engaged in the region, in the face of an increasingly bold and uncompromising China, and a North Korean regime intent on holding the US homeland directly at threat. The yardstick for its future success will be the willingness of Canberra and Tokyo to equalize the security triangle.

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<sup>15</sup> Ankit Panda, 'South China Sea: Japan's *Izumo* Helicopter Carrier Conducts Drill With US Navy Carrier', *The Diplomat*, 19 June 2017: <https://thediplomat.com/2017/06/south-china-sea-japans-izumo-helicopter-carrier-conducts-drill-with-us-navy-carrier/>.

## Annex: Key dates in the bilateral defence relationship

- March 2007: Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation (JDSC) signed, establishing regular 2+2 talks at foreign and defence ministerial level
- Dec 2008: Memorandum on Defence Cooperation signed by defence ministers
- May 2010: First Acquisition and Cross-Serving Agreement (ACSA) inked
- Nov 2010: Joint statement on nuclear issues released
- Jan 2013: First ACSA comes into effect, framework for logistical support during HADR situations
- March 2013: Information security agreement comes into force
- Jul 2014: Abbott and Abe agree to elevate the relationship to a “special strategic relationship” and also signed the Agreement Concerning the Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology.
- Dec 2015: Joint statement Next steps of the Special Strategic Partnership: Asia, Pacific and Beyond
- March 2016: The Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force (JMSDF) dispatched a Soryu-class diesel-electric attack submarine to Sydney to participate in a joint naval exercise with the Royal Australian Navy and Royal Australian Air Force.
- April 2016: Turnbull announces that Japan lost out in the three-way competitive evaluation to build Australia’s new submarine fleet
- August 2016: Second Japan-Australia Cyber Policy Dialogue
- October 2016: Japan-Australia Space Security Dialogue in October 2016
- Jan 2017: New revised ACSA signed [‘will facilitate greater mutual logistical support between the Japan Self-Defence Forces and the Australian Defence Force.’]
- Now: Planning another agreement (by end of 2017) to facilitate more collaboration between ADF and SDF