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Discussion Paper

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Shaping the Future: The US-Japan-Australia Strategic Triangle

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The paper will first explain why and how the US-Japan-Australia security cooperation originally formed and has developed from a historical perspective. Next it will discuss strategic values of this trilateral framework by focusing upon its external and internal functions. Finally, the paper will address how the trilateral security cooperation can contribute to regional security given the growing regional uncertainty and unpredictability caused by the new US administration inaugurated in January 2017.

1 Historical Overview

Although the United States, Japan and Australia strengthened their bilateral relations during the 1990s, it was not until the 2000s that the three countries formalized trilateral security cooperation. At the meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in July 2001, Australian foreign minister Alexander Downer proposed a trilateral meeting, later called a Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD), to U.S. secretary of state Colin Powell and Japanese foreign minister Makiko Tanaka. Powell and Tanaka soon agreed to Downer's suggestion, and the first TSD-style meeting was held at the sub-cabinet level in July 2002. Between 2002 and 2005, TSD was held several times on the sidelines of bilateral alliance meetings. Issues discussed in these meetings involved North Korea's nuclear and missile development, counter-proliferation and counter-terrorism cooperation in the region.[2]

The development of this trilateral process reflected the three countries' common concerns with newly evolving security challenges, such as North Korea's missile and nuclear development, the emergence of Islamic terrorism, and the rise of China. Calling China a "strategic competitor" rather than a "strategic partner", the new US George W. Bush administration began to revitalize its relations with like-minded regional allies and partners. It also encouraged so-called "spokes to spokes" cooperation among regional US allies to meet common security challenges in the

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2 James L. Schoff, "The Evolution of US-Japan-Australia Security Cooperation", in Yuki Tatsumi (eds.), US-Japan-Australia Security Cooperation: Prospects and Challenges (Washington DC: Stimson Institute, 2015), p. 40.

region.[3] Japan also became increasingly worried about China's growing power and influence, as well as North Korea's missile and nuclear development. Japan was especially concerned with China's growing maritime activities in the region surrounding Japan. While Australia faced no direct military threat from China, and was cautious about Washington's tougher approach, it clearly recognized that Australia's future security would depend upon strategic relations among regional great powers, especially between the US and China. In order to preserve a favorable security environment, it became increasingly important for both Japan and Australia to maintain the US strategic presence in the region.

Despite the three countries' geostrategic interests, many of the issues discussed via TSD centered on low-key, non-traditional security issues such as counter-terrorism and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR). It was in such non-traditional security fields that Japan and Australia, along with the United States, enhanced their practical cooperation on ground. Japan and Australia actively joined the US-led proliferation security initiatives (PSI) launched in May 2003. They were also active in HA/DR operations after the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami in Indonesia, as members of a "core group" with the United States and India. In February 2005, moreover, Australia's Howard Government decided to send 450 ADF personnel to protect the SDF unit operating in Samawa for reconstruction operations in Iraq.

Bilateral and trilateral cooperation in Iraq, as well as their respective roles in the global war on terror, made US policymakers realize the value of trilateral security cooperation with Japan and Australia. As a result, TSD was upgraded to the full-ministerial level in 2005, and the first formal meeting was held in March 2006. In February 2007, the three countries agreed to create the Security and Defense Cooperation Forum (SDCF) led by representatives of the defense and foreign ministries and including their militaries and service staff. The first SDCF meeting was held in April 2007 in Tokyo. Japan and Australia also made efforts to enhance their bilateral security cooperation, seen as the "weakest link" in the trilateral chain. In March 2007, the two countries announced a high-profile Joint Declaration for Security Cooperation. The Defense Cooperation Memorandum was also concluded between the Japanese Ministry of Defense and Australian Department of Defence in December 2008.

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[3] William T. Tow, "The Trilateral Strategic Dialogue: Facilitating Community-Building or Revisiting Containment?", in Tow et al., Assessing the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (Washington DC: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2008), p.4.

Such cooperation was to some extent driven by the strong initiative of politicians and officials under conservative governments of the three countries. Both Australian Prime Minister John Howard and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe strongly pushed bilateral and trilateral security cooperation involving the United States. They even tried to upgrade the partnership to a Quadrilateral Strategic Dialogue (QSD) by adding India. This is why, when these two leaders left their governments and new, less conservative leaders (Yasuo Fukuda in Japan and Kevin Rudd in Australia) took power in August and December 2007, some questioned whether TSD would keep its momentum.[4] Indeed, both Fukuda and Rudd showed little interests in QSD, and the idea disappeared for the time being when in February 2008 Australian Foreign Minister Stephen Smith announced Canberra's unilateral withdrawal from the QSD. Rudd also criticized Japan for its "scientific" whale hunts in the Antarctic and threatened international legal action.

Nevertheless, an actual TSD process including both ministerial and high-rank officials' meetings continued despite leadership changes in both countries. Although the trilateral ministerial meeting was not held between 2010 and 2012, the three countries continued to hold and develop trilateral trainings/exercises under the SDCF. Bilateral defense and security cooperation between Japan and Australia also continued under the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) and Australia's Labor Party. The countries signed an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) and an Information Security Agreement (ISA) in May 2010 and May 2012, respectively. After the Great East Japan Earthquake of March 2011, Australia dispatched three out of its four C-17s to help relief efforts. This was highly appreciated by the Japanese government. An ADF contingent also began to support JSDF engineering units dispatched for the United Nations (UN) mission in South Sudan starting in August 2012.

Close security links between the three countries were further upgraded when conservative prime ministers took power in both Japan and Australia. Under the banner of a "special strategic partnership," Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott pushed for cooperation on Australia's future submarine project. They also facilitated joint operations and exercises between the JSDF and the ADF. During this period, the TSD ministerial meeting and trilateral defense ministers' meeting, which had not been held since September 2009 and July 2010, resumed. In November 2014, Abe, Abbott and US President Barack Obama held the trilateral summit meeting for the first time in seven years.

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[4] See for instance, Michael Auslin, "Shaping a Pacific Future: Washington's Goal for the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue", in Tow et al., Assessing the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue, p.20.

The failure of the submarine deal – the April 2016 decision by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's government not to choose Japan as its partner for building Australia's next submarines – poured cold water on warming relations between the two countries. Some view Australia's close economic relations with China, as well as Australia's leadership change from Abbott to more "pro-China" politician Malcolm Turnbull, as the major reason for the setback. While there is no clear evidence to support such a view, it is at least true that the "strategic interests" some Japanese and American officials emphasized in Japan's submarine bid were not shared to the same degree by the Turnbull government. Some conclude that, by the failure of submarine bid, three countries lost an important opportunity to step up their cooperation toward more "mutually-reinforcing latticed alliance" beyond the Cold-war type "hub-and-spokes" alliance structure.[5]

Despite the fanfare around the lost submarine bid, it seems so far that US-Japan-Australia security cooperation maintained its momentum. In July 2016, Japan, Australia and the United States held a TSD for the first time in three years. Japanese and Australian defense ministers also met in August of that year and confirmed that they would promote even stronger defense cooperation between the two countries. In late 2016, the three signed a Trilateral Intelligence Sharing Agreement (TISA), enabling more data-sharing among the three countries in key areas of the region. Close bilateral cooperation between Japan and Australia have also continued, as demonstrated by the revision of ACSA in early 2017 and the negotiation of the Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA), to be concluded by the end of 2017. To examine why trilateral security cooperation has kept its high profile, we now turn to an examination of the strategic value of trilateral security cooperation for the United States, Japan and Australia.

2 Strategic Value of Trilateral Security Cooperation

Some view the Trilateral Security Cooperation or TSD as "little NATO" or even a containment mechanism against China.[6] Unlike NATO, however, TSD has no treaty obligation that binds its members together, committing them to protect each other. It is a consultative mechanism to address a wide range of regional security issues, rather

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5 Eric Heginbotham and Richard J. Samuels, "Poor Substitute: No Japanese Submarines Down Under", Snapshot, May 3, 2016, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/australia/2016-05-03/poor-substitute.

6 Purnendra Jain introduced such views in his commentary. See Jain, "A 'little NATO' against China", Asia Times Online, March 18, 2016 http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/HC18Ad01.html.,

than targeting a particular country. True, both Japan and Australia are two closest allies of the United States in the region, and Japan and Australia have become the most important security partners to each other next to the United States. Still, Japan and Australia so far have no intention to conclude an official security treaty to protect each other. It is unlikely that the Japan-Australia "special strategic partnership" will be upgraded to a formal alliance in the near future.

Nevertheless, trilateral security cooperation has provided certain strategic value to these three countries. This value can be found in the internal and external functions of their trilateral cooperation. Externally, trilateral cooperation has helped the US, Japan and Australia to shape the regional order based on their common interests and values. These three countries often have different threat perceptions or policy priorities due to their different strategic backgrounds. In particular, there remains a certain gap between the US, Japan and Australia regarding how they evaluate a direct military threat from China. Nevertheless, they have common interests in maintaining and strengthening an open, inclusive and rules-based international order based on a strong US military presence in the region. Such a common "order perception", as well as a "threat perception", has been a foundation of close defense and security cooperation among the three countries in a wide range of activities.

A good example of such activities is the three countries' collective action on the South China Sea issue. After the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) announced its ruling on the South China Sea dispute, the US, Japanese and Australian foreign ministers expressed their "strong support" for the rule of law and called on China and the Philippines to abide by the PCA's Award as "final and legally binding on both parties".[7] This was one of the strongest statements made globally by a foreign leader after the PCA ruling. Although both Japan and Australia are unlikely to join the US-led Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea at least in the near future, they have strongly supported the FONOPs, and also enhanced their defense engagement including capacity-building and defense equipment cooperation with Southeast Asian countries over the past few years.8 The US, Japan and Australia have also increased the number of military training exercises conducted in South East Asia, including in the South China Sea, to demonstrate their will and solidarity to sustain the rules-based international order.

This sort of external function is especially important given that the region lacks any multilateral setting that can effectively address some "hard" security problems

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7 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Japan-United States-Australia Trilateral Strategic Dialogue Joint Statement", July 25, 2016, http://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/ocn/page3e_000514.html.

8 Tomohiko Satake, "Japan and Australia Ramp up Defence Engagement in the South China Sea", East Asia Forum, 26 April 2016, http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2016/04/26/japan-and-australia-ramp-up-defence-engagement-in-the-south-china-sea/.

like the South China Sea or North Korea's missile and nuclear development. Even for "softer" security issues like HA/DR, there is no regional multilateral institution that can effectively respond to a massive disaster by mobilizing regional countries' military assets. As demonstrated by their close coordination and cooperation after the Sumatra Tsunami Incident (2004), the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake (2011), and Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines (2013), trilateral coordination between Australia, Japan and the United States can complement existing multilateral frameworks and get around their weaknesses by providing more effective measures during a crisis or a conflict. In this way, the US-Japan-Australia trilateral security cooperation can strengthen "networks and patchworks of differently configured and overlapping bilaterals, trilaterals, quadrilaterals, and other multilateral groupings that, stitched together, define the regional architecture".[9]

At the same time, the three countries have used their trilateral cooperation in order to shape each other's interests or behaviors, as well as to shape their external security environment. As famous historian Paul Schroeder argues, alliances can often work as "pacts of restraint"—not only responding to an external security threat, but to restrain or control the actions of the partners in the alliance themselves.[10] Such an internal function, as well as an external function, has an important effect upon the success and the durability of trilateral security cooperation.

From Japanese (and Australian) perspectives, TSD has functioned as an important tool to jointly project regional allies' influence onto the US decision-making process. In particular, encouraging continuous US military and strategic presence as a foundation of regional stability and prosperity has been one of the most important goals of this trilateral process. The US military presence in Asia has allowed these regional allies to put more resources towards economic and civilian sectors than their own military strength, while enjoying close diplomatic and economic relations with other regional countries including China. For Japan and Australia, China's rise is manageable, if not avoidable, so long as the US maintains strategic primacy in the region. Maintaining and strengthening the US military presence are thus important in order to create an environment where Japan and especially Australia do not have to "choose" between two regional giants.

This is why TSD was initially proposed by regional allies, rather than by the United States. By institutionally binding the US strategic commitment to regional

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9 Victor D. Cha, "American Alliances and Asia's Regional Architecture", in Saadia M. Pekkanen, John Ravenhill, and Rosemary Foot (eds.), The Oxford Handbook of the International Relations of Asia (London: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 750.

10 Paul Schroeder, "Alliances, 1815-1939: Weapons of Power and Tools of Management", in Klaus Knorr (eds.), Historical Problems of National Security (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1976), pp. 247-86.

security affairs, and gaining access to the US decision-making process for regional security affairs through the TSD, Japan and Australia could reduce the strategic uncertainty about US power and shape its strategic behavior.[11] This was particularly important at a time when events in the Middle East threatened to dominate foreign and security policy priorities in Washington. Japan also understood that Washington welcomed Tokyo's close security cooperation with Canberra. For Japan, enhancing bilateral security ties with Australia could also strengthen its security cooperation with the United States. In other words, Japan has mostly seen its cooperation with Australia in the prism of the US alliance.

TSD has also helped to shape regional allies' behavior by encouraging greater allied burden-sharing on regional and global security issues. Most importantly, it has spurred Japan's greater security roles in the region and beyond by making Tokyo "think more about the world like Australia and the United States do".[12] Indeed, encouraging Japan's greater regional and global security roles has been one of the consistent aims of Australia's defense engagement with Japan since the end of the Cold War. Australia has supported greater security roles for Japan not only because it helps to maintain a stable power-balance in the region, but it would strengthen the US-Japan alliance that is the linchpin of the US regional presence. In this context, both the US and Australia have used the TSD and the SDCF to engage Japan more deeply on bilateral defense cooperation in the region even beyond Japanese territory. Some Japanese also see the TSD as an important element of "normalization" of Japan's security policy.[13]

Another "hidden" agenda of the TSD process is to prevent Australia from inclining too much towards China. By 2005, China had already become Australia's second largest trading partner, overtaking Japan. Prime Minister Howard and Foreign Minister Downer made maximum efforts to enhance Australia's diplomatic and economic engagement with China, while maintaining a strong US alliance. When both President Bush and Chinese Premier Hu Jintao coincidently visited Canberra in October 2003, Howard invited Hu to address a joint sitting of the Houses of Parliament the day after Bush had done so. When he visited China in August 2004, moreover, Downer suggested that a conflict over Taiwan "does not automatic invoke

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11 Michael Green, "Strategic Asian Triangles", in Pekkanen et al. (eds), The Oxford Handbook of the International Relations of Asia, p. 762.

12 Quoted in Auslin, "Shaping a Pacific Future: Washington's Goal for the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue", p.19.

13 Akihiko Tanaka, "Trilateral Strategic Dialogue: a Japanese Perspective", in Tow et al., Assessing the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue, p.35.

the ANZUS Treaty".[14] It is argued that both Japanese and American policymakers were worrying about a drift in Australia's policies to China, and such concern worked as a key catalyst for the development of TSD.[15] Japan's security approach to Australia, including its attempt to win the submarine bid, might be understood in this context.

In this way, the US-Australia-Japan trilateral framework has helped to shape partners' behavior and policies, as well as shaping the regional order in favor of the three countries' interests. Put another way, these three countries have developed trilateral security cooperation in order to "keep the US in, let Japan do more, and tether Australia". Such internal, as well as external, functions of the TSD seem to have increased the dialogue's weight in a more uncertain regional security environment due to the changing power balance in the region.

3 Trilateralism in the age of Trump

The victory of US presidential candidate Donald Trump – as well as his nationalistic and isolationist remarks during the election campaign – increased the unpredictability and the uncertainty of the regional strategic landscape. Although Trump and his national security team have repeatedly stressed America's continuous military commitment to the region, there seems to be enduring concerns in both the Japanese and Australian policy communities that Trump might suddenly change US Asia policy, especially regarding China. This is because of the "transactional" nature of his foreign policy approach, the absence of a clear and coherent regional strategy, as well as Trump's unpredictable and extraordinary personality. Mr. Trump's excessive belief in military power under the slogan of "peace through strength", and his neglect of liberal values such as free trade and human rights, have already caused some tensions in the region. In Australia, there are a certain number of people who advocate that Australia should "keep distance" from Trump's America. Should such a policy become real, it would also damage the unity and the solidarity of trilateral security cooperation between the US, Japan and Australia.

In such a period of time, shaping US regional security policy—one of the most important functions of the trilateral mechanism—has become more important than

[14] Quoted in Michael Wesley, "The Trilateral Strategic Dialogue's Institutional Politics", in William T. Tow et al. (eds.), Asia-Pacific Security: US, Australia and Japan and the New Security Triangle (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), p.43.

[15] See for instance, Hugh White, "Trilateralism and Australia: Australia and the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue with America and Japan", in Tow et al. (eds.), Asia-Pacific Security, p. 108.

ever. Japan has already projected certain influence over US regional policy (especially regarding North Korea) through the close personal relationship between Prime Minister Abe and President Trump. Such a policy can be reinforced if other regional allies line up with Japan. In this sense, a recent signal of Australia's greater commitment to the alliance, including Prime Minister Turnbull's announcement that ANZUS will be invoked if North Korea attacks the United States, should be welcomed by Japan. In reality, Australia's military support for US operations in the Korean Peninsula would be limited. Nevertheless, assuming greater burden-sharing within the alliance framework would enhance Australia's voice over US regional security policy and enhance the strategic value of trilateral security cooperation as a means to shape US behavior and policies.

Trilateral cooperation is also important to further accelerate Japan's security normalization (or "international standardization"). While Japan has already implemented some new initiatives decided by the new security legislation that came to force in March 2016, trilateral military training and exercises under the framework of TSD or SDCF could further push such a move. Japan has also recently tried to enhance its intelligence community, including the potential establishment of its own foreign intelligence agency, in order to gather overseas security-related information. Japan's greater engagement with "Five Eyes" countries like the US and Australia in terms of information-sharing and intelligence-gathering can at least partially offset Japan's current weakness in this field. The US and Australia could also engage with Japan's defense industry more deeply to help and encourage overseas transfers of Japan's defense equipment.

Some argue that the trilateral security cooperation should increase its membership by adding other US allies and partners, especially India. It is, however, open to question whether such an expanded mini-lateral framework could maintain the current strategic value and momentum of the existing trilateral cooperation. Besides China's opposition to such a framework, expanding membership would increase bureaucratic procedures and arrangements, which could decrease the strategic flexibility of trilateral dialogues. Instead, establishing or enhancing more US-centered triangles, such as the US-Japan-India, the US-Japan-Korea, and the US-Australia-India groupings, could be an alternative option.

At the same time, the emergence of a US President like Trump may suggest that both Japan and Australia should seek broader security roles beyond previous linchpins of US regional strategy as its "northern and southern anchors". While sustaining the US military and strategic presence in the region remains important, Japan and Australia should also hedge against growing future uncertainty, including the emergence of a more multipolar (or less unipolar) world. This explains why Tokyo

has recently pushed its “diversification” of security partnerships with other regional countries, including Russia and China. Japan and Australia have also pushed the trilateral security dialogue concept with other like-minded democracies like India. Promoting such “middle-power cooperation” could be another viable option to gain greater leverage and enhance regional common voices not only against China, but against the United States. It could be also a foundation of community-building in the Asia-Pacific region in the future.