



NEXT STEPS FOR THE US-AUSTRALIA-JAPAN TRILATERAL DEFENCE RELATIONSHIP

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ALLIANCE BRIEF

The Asia-Pacific region is facing a raft of geopolitical challenges. North Korea is ascending the nuclear ladder, China's influence in Southeast Asia is growing, as is uncertainty about China's commitment to the international rules-based order. Amidst this, the United States, Australia and Japan partnership is uniquely placed to champion international rules and norms, demonstrate deterrence, and build security capacity throughout the region. This trilateral is now more important than ever and it is critical that its members strengthen and invest in their relationship, as well as continue to demonstrate its role in stewarding peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific.

Each partner has good reason to approach the region's challenges through a trilateral lens. For the United States, involving Australia and Japan in collectively responding to the peaceful rise of China and deterring increasingly provocative actions from North Korea is essential to any regional strategy. The United States also sees Australia and Japan playing larger roles in burden sharing when it comes to security assistance in Southeast Asia. Japan has a national interest in the trilateral playing a broader deterrence role in the Asia-Pacific, one that gives it strategic flexibility in responding to regional crisis through collective means.¹ Australia's interest appears to be more operational, focusing on building interoperability with the United States and Japan through joint exercises and training.

In the last few years, the initiatives the trilateral has put forward have proven the value of the arrangement in meeting the national interests of all three partners. The Trump administration should build upon these existing initiatives and prioritise using the trilateral as a vehicle to address future regional challenges. The first opportunity for the new US administration to set a regional agenda

for the trilateral will be on the sidelines of this year's Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore. On the sidelines of the Dialogue, US Secretary of Defense James Mattis should prioritise hosting a Trilateral Ministers Meeting (TMM) to enable further cooperation among partners, and signal this collective approach to the region. This brief will outline four opportunities for further trilateral initiatives.

China and the South China Sea

Recent activities in the East and South China Sea have called into question whether China truly wants to adhere to a rules-based order and build constructive relationships with its neighbours. Last year's ruling from The Hague's Permanent Court of Arbitration on the Philippines vs. China territorial dispute – and China's reaction – was widely seen as a test of whether Beijing would adhere to a rules-based international order and international law. China's blatant rejection of the ruling put a marker in the sand that Beijing will "take all necessary measures to protect its territorial

sovereignty and maritime rights and interests”.² In response, the members of the trilateral released unilateral statements supporting the ruling and a joint statement was released on the sidelines of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) ministerial meeting in Vientiane declaring the court’s ruling was final and binding on all parties.

While the trilateral has a recent history of synchronising its strategic messaging on the South China Sea, the group needs to take steps beyond this in order to demonstrate to China that it is serious about the regional rules-based order.

As a first step, the United States, Australia and Japan need to deepen the sharing of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) data gathered from their military and intelligence assets in the region. Under the recently signed US Australia Japan Trilateral Information Sharing Arrangement (TISA), the three countries can share classified information on all defence operations and exercises.³ This will enable the sharing of naval ship, submarine, and air data, providing a holistic laydown of Chinese activities in the South China Sea. This data should also be selectively shared with claimant states, most importantly Vietnam and the Philippines, who lack the ISR assets to develop a clear picture of maritime activities in their waters.

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The next step should be conducting a trilateral Passing Exercise (PASSEX), which constitutes navies from multiple countries, improving their interoperability.⁴ This can be easily done after one of the existing multilateral naval exercises in the region. A PASSEX (not to be confused with a Freedom of Navigation Operation (FONOP), which is a politically sensitive issue for Australia, Japan and the United States) would both send a message of trilateral strength to the region, as

well as exercise key elements of interoperability such as communications, ship boarding, and search and seizure. The capabilities exercised would provide each navy with valuable skills that would be useful in times of conflict and when conducting trilateral humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations.

Korean Peninsula

North Korea’s missile program and attempts to miniaturise nuclear warheads remains a key focus of the trilateral. Recently expanded cooperation on military exercises such as Foal Eagle has been a big step in building interoperability between the trilateral partners. However, bringing Australia and Japan into US contingency planning should be a goal of the arrangement going forward in an effort to demonstrate deterrence and cooperation against the North Korean threat.

A necessary step before integrating Australia and Japan into US contingency planning will be starting a quadrilateral dialogue that includes the Republic of Korea. This dialogue should be held at the ministerial level to ensure decisions are developed from the highest levels of government. To allay Korean sensitivities to integrating other countries into contingency planning, the dialogue could begin with talks over a humanitarian assistance disaster relief (HADR) scenario. This would enable the parties to build relationships and achieve a comfort level where they could move to more sensitive scenarios in the future.

There are many areas that Japan and Australia would be able to contribute to if a conflict, although unlikely, did arise. In recent years Australia has contributed key resources to coalition forces in Afghanistan, namely logistics support, air-to-air refueling, a Special Forces Task Force and a Reconstruction Taskforce. Australia could contribute similar capabilities to a crisis on the peninsula. Japan, with its numerous United States Forces Japan bases, would be a major logistics and staging hub for a crisis on the Korean Peninsula. One area of concern for all three nations is evacuating their citizens during a possible conflict. Japan would serve as an ideal staging ground for flights from Australia and the United States evacuating citizens from the peninsula.

Trilateral initiatives in the South China Sea and Korean Peninsula will likely cause consternation in China. In

each case, the trilateral partners will have to carefully handle any messaging both privately and publicly considering the purpose of the initiatives.

Trilateral defence capacity building

A key focus of the trilateral is to build partner capacity with like-minded nations in the Asia Pacific. Of particular importance is building states' maritime security, HADR and peacekeeping capabilities.⁵ With the advent of the US Department of Defense's Maritime Security Initiative and Japan's new security and defence legislation, the number of defence investments flowing to partner countries in Southeast Asia is at an all-time high. This influx of assets and funds needs to be managed so that the trilateral is working towards the same goal, with an eye on deconflicting capacity building programs.⁶

A key component in deconflicting capacity building initiatives is sharing security assistance plans and forecasts and identifying areas of common interest in which to invest. For example, in the Philippines, all three countries have gifted patrol boats to the Philippines Coast Guard and Navy. It should be an objective of the trilateral that these maritime assets are delivered with the right equipment to make the boats interoperable with each other and making sure they seamlessly integrate into the broader Philippines maritime fleet.

The trilateral should also aim to replicate successful parts of Australia's Pacific Patrol Boat Program (PPBP) in Southeast Asia. Australia has been running the PPBP program in the Pacific Islands for more than 20 years. The program gifts boats with life cycle maintenance, training and places in-country advisers to assist countries in developing a maritime fleet and strategy. This successful program has many aspects that can and should be replicated in Southeast Asia.

An example that the trilateral can replicate elsewhere is peacekeeping capacity building in Mongolia. This past year the trilateral launched an initiative in Mongolia to align security assistance to build Ulaanbaatar's peacekeeping capabilities.⁷ The Mongolian Armed Forces (MAF), well respected in peacekeeping missions, have deployed around the world and have a contingent currently in South Sudan and the Congo. The MAF has also participated in coalition operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, with Mongolian troops operating on the ground in Afghanistan for the past 13 years.

But Mongolia's contribution to global peace and security has been constantly challenged by its neighbours, Russia and China. For example, US officials have noted that China often cuts off air space for Mongolian troops deploying and returning from Afghanistan.⁸ This type of pressure has caused Mongolia to look to its "third neighbours", including the United States, Australia and Japan, for support for its contributions to stability operations abroad. This year the United States, Australia and Japan are aligning their security assistance to Mongolia in order to continue to build its peacekeeping capability. This includes contributing assets to the MAF's engineering company and providing in-country training, as well as offering officer slots at national military academies.⁹

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The next step should be to integrate the United States, Australia and Japan into one another's wider security assistance planning. For instance the US Department of Defense, when developing the plan for its 2018 Maritime Security Initiative investments in the region, should bring Australia and Japan into the conversation to ensure the projected investments are synchronised. Additionally, the Trilateral Information Sharing Arrangement should be implemented to gain further transparency in each government's budget decision-making process and projected security assistance investments. This will ensure that the investments that the United States, Australia and Japan are making are sound and fit seamlessly, creating a holistic capacity building strategy.

Trilateral exercises and training

The greatest area of growth for the trilateral in recent years has been joint military exercises and training. Over the past two years the trilateral has tripled the amount of joint exercises, including multiple exercises



JS Ashigara, USS Wayne E. Meyer and USS Lake Champlain transit the Philippine Sea on 28 April 2017 (Photo: US Navy)

on HADR and maritime security.¹⁰ The trend at the end of the Obama administration was to concentrate on higher-end capability exercises specifically to build capacity that could be used in a major regional conflict. A prime example of this was Australian participation in the US-Japan-Korea exercise, Pacific Dragon, during Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC) 2016.¹¹ With Australia currently building its first Aegis-equipped ship HMAS Hobart (slated for completion in 2017), the trilateral should find opportunities starting in the second half of 2017 to trilaterally exercise ballistic missile defence (BMD) tracking and targeting.¹² All three nations have also recently acquired F-35 capabilities and a trilateral exercise should be developed to test air-to-air interoperability.

With the three countries making large investments in maritime security in Southeast Asia, more should be done to exercise with like-minded partners in the region. In 2016 Australia and Japan participated in the US-Philippines annual exercise Balikatan.¹³ The exercise, which builds combined planning and combat readiness, is a key venue where not only Australian and Japanese troops can participate but where all three countries can test the interoperability of their aircraft and patrol boats. The Malabar maritime exercises between the United States and India is another opportunity for cooperation. India recently made Japan a permanent member of Malabar. The United States and Japan should encourage India to extend the same invitation to Australia.¹⁴

As the Australia-Japan bilateral relationship grows closer it will enable more trilateral training and exercises. The recently signed Australia Japan Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA) allows for closer bilateral defence logistics support and cooperation during military exercises and training.¹⁵ The negotiations for the Australia Japan Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) are still underway, with both governments stating they intend to reach an agreement this year.¹⁶ The RAA will facilitate joint exercises and activities by providing legal protection for forces operating in Australia and Japan. The arrangements together will decrease many of the bilateral obstacles Australia and Japan face in conducting joint military exercises and training.

The trilateral has made significant progress in laying the foundation to increase interoperability, training and cooperation. In particular the Trilateral Information Sharing Arrangement will enable the United States, Australia and Japan to share information on contingency planning that up to this point lacked the proper legal mechanism.

Next steps

The trilateral arrangement between the United States, Australia and Japan is an important vehicle for shoring up regional stability, norms and institutions. Expanding cooperation among the partners and synchronising capacity building efforts and outreach across the region are further steps the trilateral can take to

bolster the regional order. Listed below are seven recommendations the trilateral should consider ahead of the Shangri-La Dialogue:¹⁷

- 1. Relationship building:** A trilateral Defence Ministerial should be held on the margins of the Shangri-la Dialogue to set the agenda and goals of the arrangement for the Trump administration.
- 2. Responding to a rising China:** The United States, Australia and Japan should enact the TISA to share data of their assets in and around the South China Sea. Select data should also be shared with Southeast Asia partners in order to provide them a common operating picture. The Trump administration should continue to run regular FONOPS within 12 nautical miles of artificial islands in the South China Sea. Discussions should begin on developing a trilateral PASSEX in the South China Sea.
- 3. Korean Peninsula:** A standing dialogue should be developed with the ROK to bring Japan and Australia into contingency planning on the Korean Peninsula.
- 4. ASEAN:** The trilateral should continue bolstering ASEAN's voice and presence in the region. This includes developing higher capability multilateral military exercises and encouraging maritime security information sharing between ASEAN states.
- 5. Capacity building:** Initiatives to deconflict and cooperate on security assistance to Southeast Asia should be honed. Each nation should utilise the TISA to share security assistance plans and goals in Southeast Asia. Japan and Australia should be brought into Maritime Security Initiative investments planning and vice versa.
- 6. Trilateral training and exercises:** The TISA should be utilised to increase the size and scope of existing exercises. Japan's successful participation in Talisman Sabre should garner it a greater role in future iterations. The trilateral should work to expand exercising with like-minded allies and partners including India, the ROK and the Philippines. Both the United States and Japan should lobby India to include Australia in future iterations of Malabar. The trilateral partners should use their presence at Balikatan to exercise interoperability of their gifted aircraft and patrol vessels to the Philippines. The trilateral should build exercises based on recent defence acquisitions by the partners, specifically exercises to test interoperability of Aegis ships and the F-35.
- 7. Leveraging international agreements to expand defence cooperation:** The trilateral should utilise the recently negotiated and soon to be agreements to develop a foundation for deeper cooperation on exercises, trainings and contingency planning.

Endnotes

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Erum Jilani recently served as a Senior Advisor Asia Pacific Policy with the Office of the Secretary of Defense. She managed the US-Australia-Japan portfolio, building trilateral initiatives and leading negotiations for the US Australia Japan Trilateral Information Sharing Arrangement. Her other appointments during the Obama administration included serving as a Defense Fellow to Secretary Hagel and Mongolia Country Director at the Pentagon.

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Cover photo: A member of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force, Asaka, Japan, October 2016 (Getty Images)

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