



India-Japan-United States: Emerging Dynamics of the Trilateral Relationship

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The trilateral relationship between India, Japan and US is slowly gaining momentum as reflected the in first summit meeting held in 2018 among the leaders of the three countries. As the economic and political centre of gravity shifts to the Indo-Pacific, geopolitics of the region is undergoing unprecedented transformation given the complex interplays among regional and global powers. Given this scenario, the triangular relationship between India-Japan-US will have a crucial impact on the emerging geopolitical environment of the region.

Indian Navy ships Kolkata and Shakti participated in a Group sail in South China Sea, along with the ships from the of the US, Japan and Philippines navies from 03-09 May 2019. Six combatants from the four participating countries conducted formation exercises, joint naval drills in the South China Sea in a six days exercise aimed “at deepening partnership and mutual understanding among the participating navies”.¹ At the conclusion of the exercise the Indian Navy spokesperson said that “it showed India’s commitment to operate with like-minded nations to ensure safe maritime environment through enhanced interoperability”.² Cmdr. Andrew Klug, the commanding officer of the US Navy guided-missile destroyer USS William P. Lawrence, said “professional engagements with our allies, partners and friends in the region are opportunities to build upon our existing, strong relationships...”³ Such a joint exercise in contentious waters of the South China Sea (SCS) is significant given the backdrop of complex sovereignty disputes in the region between China and Southeast Asian countries. Also it comes at a time when the US and China are engaged in trade war. This exercise and the overall steady progress in relationship between India, Japan and the US is often interpreted as a tactic to balance or to contain China in the region.



Figure: 1

Source: <https://twitter.com/indiannavy>

In recent time the India-Japan-US, a trilateral which was underperforming for a long in the past, seems to be gaining new energy particularly in the light of the first trilateral summit meeting held in 2018 among the leaders of the three countries. As the Indo-Pacific emerges as a centre of global attention, the triangular relationship will play a considerable role in shaping emerging geopolitical trends in the region.

The Trilateral Relationship Rooted in Bilateral Ties

The relationship between India-Japan and the US is gradually emerging as a robust trilateral in the region. Recently the US-Japan Security Consultative Committee meeting was held in a 2+2 format with the Foreign and Defence Ministers of the two countries participating in Washington, on April 19, 2019. The Joint Statement issued after the meeting specifically emphasised on the significance of security and defence cooperation with India in the Indo-Pacific. Highlighting the importance of the trilateral relationship it emphasized on the importance of the first meeting between India, Japan and US in 2018 and also the significance of Malabar exercise and Cope India exercise 2018.⁴

The emerging strong trilateral relationship is of course, embedded in growing close bilateral ties between the three countries. India and Japan have recognised each other as a “Special Strategic and Global Partners” in 2014. Prime Ministers of the two countries meet regularly at the summit level interactions. India’s special partnership with Japan is also crucial part of India’s Act East Policy. For Japan “India is the most important partner to realise a Free and Open Indo-Pacific” said the Japanese Minister for Foreign Affairs Taro Kono at the 10th India-Japan Foreign Ministers’ Dialogue on 7 January 2019 in New Delhi. The two countries are working for early realization of 2+2 Ministerial Meeting and commencement of negotiations on Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) to deepen the defence cooperation between the two countries. ACSA once concluded would allow armed forces of the two countries to use each other bases for logistical support.

Indo-US relationship has undergone significant transformation over the past quarter century, shedding the inhibitions of the past. Both have recognised each other as strategic partners. US National Security Strategy 2017 welcomed “India’s emergence as a leading global

power and Major Defense Partner for US".⁵ In 2018 India was granted License Exception Strategic Trade Authorization (STA-1) by the US, making it the third Asian country to get this status.⁶ The inaugural India-US 2+2 dialogue at the Foreign and Defence Ministers level in September 2018, welcomed India's inclusion "among the top tier of countries entitled to license-free exports, re-exports, and transfers under STA-1"⁷ and expansion in two-way trade in defence items. The long-pending Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) was also welcomed since it would facilitate India's "access to advanced defence systems and enable India to optimally utilise its existing US origin platforms".⁸

On the other hand, US' long term alliance with Japan has remained the linchpin of its engagement in Asia for a long and remains the cornerstone of Japan's foreign policy. US President Donald Trump during his four-day visit to Japan starting from 25 May 2019 said that US-Japan alliance is "steadfast and ironclad"⁹ and is committed to peace and stability in the region. He called Japanese businesses to increase investment in the US and said that two countries "are hard at work" negotiating a deal to address trade imbalances.¹⁰

Therefore, bilaterally there have been significant progresses in the relationship between each of the three countries over the period.

Vision and Strategies for the Indo-Pacific

The policy discourse and documents in the three countries have eloquently put forward their visions, strategies and policy for the newly constructed Indo-Pacific framework. India's vision was clearly articulated by Prime Minister's Narendra Modi in his speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue 2018, as he said India's vision stands for a "free, open and inclusive" Indo-pacific (which expands from the shores of Africa to that of the Americas). He made it clear that that the Indo-Pacific is not "a club of limited members"¹¹ and ASEAN centrality is integral to the vision. Setting up of Indo-Pacific Division in the Ministry of External Affairs is in consistence with India's vision for the region. The new wing will bring together ASEAN region, Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and the Quad with the Indo-Pacific. Japan has already inducted the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy" in its foreign policy strategy in 2016 (FOIPS). The strategy is focused on promoting "connectivity between continents of Asia and Africa, rule of law, freedom of navigation, market economy, with ASEAN as a hinge of two oceans".¹² US' President Trump speaking at the APEC CEO Summit 2017 in Vietnam put forward the US vision as "a free and open Indo-Pacific".¹³ The latest document released by the Department of Defence titled "Indo-Pacific Strategy Report", on 01 June 2019 reiterates US' vision for "a free and open Indo-Pacific".¹⁴ In a strategic move, US renamed its Pacific Command to Indo-Pacific Command recognising what Secretary of State James Mattis had remarked "increasing connectivity, the Indian and Pacific Oceans"¹⁵. However, India's vision is not identical rather complementary to US' and Japan's strategy for the region. India has consistently emphasised on "inclusiveness" in its Indo-Pacific vision.

Recent Trends in the Trilateral Relationship

On December 1, 2018, the heads of government of the three countries met on the sidelines of G20 summit in Buenos Aires for the first-ever trilateral summit. The leaders reiterated that the three countries share fundamental values and will play an important role in promoting the peace,

stability and prosperity in the region. The idea of ‘inclusiveness’ in the region was emphasised at the meeting. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi gave the name of ‘JAI’ to the meeting saying that meeting was a convergence of vision between the three nations. He particularly put forward five areas during the summit where trilateral cooperation is needed including connectivity, sustainable development, maritime security, disaster relief and freedom of navigation.¹⁶ Similar areas of cooperation including connectivity and infrastructure development, counter-proliferation, counter-terrorism, maritime security, maritime domain awareness and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) were also explored earlier during the India-Japan-US Trilateral meeting at Assistant Secretary level in New Delhi in April 2018.¹⁷



Figure: 2

Source: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/in-first-ever-trilateral-summit-india-japan-us-focus-on-inclusive-indo-pacific/articleshow/66889722.cms>

In the area of **connectivity** Japan and the US have already announced trilateral infrastructure investment partnership along with Australia. The United States Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC), Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), and the Japanese Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC) issued a joint statement on July 30, 2018 announcing the partnership during the Indo-Pacific Business Forum. OPIC announced initial US’ investment of US\$13 million for the partnership project. The investment partnership was widely seen as an apparent attempt to counter growing influence of China’s Belt Road Initiative (BRI). The US’ OPIC President and CEO Ray Washburne said that OPIC “is in discussions with India right now” to conclude an MoU.¹⁸ If agreed it would be similar to the agreement US has with Japan and Australia and would streamline the process of joint investments in areas like energy, transport, tourism and technology infrastructure. With the enactment of *Better Utilization of Investment Leading to Development Act* (BUILD Act) in October 2018 and creation of US International Development Finance Corporation (USIDFC), the amounts of money that can be invested in infrastructure projects has more than doubled and also it allows the involvement of private sector. It will create new opportunities for Business to Business (B2B) cooperation from the three countries in future. India and the US have also renewed the agreement on Triangular Development Cooperation in Asia and Africa on 29 March 2019 to extend it till 2021.¹⁹ India and Japan on the other hand are engaged in the ‘Asian African Growth Corridor’ (AAGC) to promote connectivity and cooperation between sub-regions of Asia and Africa. The vision document for AAGC emphasizes that the strengths of India and Japan development programmes

“need to be fine-tuned with development needs and priorities of Africa”.²⁰ Talks are also going on for setting up of “Platform for Japan-India Business Cooperation in Asia-Africa Region” to enhance B2B exchanges for developing industrial corridors and industrial network in the region.²¹

Maritime security remains another central pillar for this trilateral relationship. The US Chief of Naval Operations Admiral John Michael Richardson visited India from 12 to 14 May 2019. The discussions with his counterpart focused exploring new areas for deepening naval cooperation between the two countries. The navies of the three countries meet regularly at the annual Malabar exercise and biennial RIMPAC exercise (India started participating since 2014). This year Malabar will be reportedly held off the coast of Japan. In 2018, for the first time Malabar exercises were held in Guam, soon after US renaming its Pacific Command as the Indo-Pacific Command. The Malabar exercises which had begun as a bilateral event between India and the US in 1992 became trilateral with Japan’s entry as a permanent participant since 2015. In addition, Indian and Japanese navies also meet for bilateral exercise JIMEX. Talks are also going on to elevate the bilateral exercise between US and India Air forces, to trilateral level in phases. Similar to Malabar, Cope India hosted by Indian Air Force could possibly be upgraded to include Japan.²²

A crucial issue challenging regional maritime security has been the long-standing South China Sea dispute. China’s rejection of The Hague Tribunal’s decision on the 2016 Philippines vs. China case further created concerns about its intentions. Both the US and Japan have maintained their position on ‘opposition to unilateral coercive actions of any country’, which may alter the status quo in the SCS and called for respect to the UNCLOS. China has been critical of US’ interference in the disputes. US, although maintains neutrality has been vocal about need to maintain freedom of navigation in the region and supportive of Japan on the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu in the East China Sea. India has consistently maintained its position on the need to maintain freedom of navigation and overflight and peaceful resolution of disputes in the region according international laws including the provisions of UNCLOS 1982.

In all the three countries, there is a certain degree of concern towards China’s assertiveness. Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific is in a flux, given the current background of geo-economic tension between US and China, Sino-India strategic competition and tensions between Japan and China. US’ willingness to engage with India in particular and the larger Indo-Pacific region in general is becoming even more significant given the ongoing intense trade and technology frictions between the US and China. Escalating the tension further has been President Donald Trump decision of effectively banning Chinese tech giant Huawei from the US market, cutting it off from every US partner, following which Huawei’s access to Google’s official Android licensing program was suspended²³ US National Defense Strategy 2018 has criticized China’s “predatory” economic tactics as a means of coercion and intimidation. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo recently said that as a commitment to free and open order, the US is “banding together with the like-minded nations like Australia, India, Japan and South Korea to make sure that each Indo-Pacific nation can protect its sovereignty from coercion”.²⁴ US has maintained that China as a revisionist power remains the biggest long-term challenge representing values antithetical to US’ values and interests. India on other hand has been apprehensive about China’s

growing footprints in the Indian Ocean and has been critical of its massive BRI initiative. PLA navy with its blue water naval capabilities to project power beyond the immediate waters, is moving beyond its traditional area of operations. Naval facilities at crucial points including the creation of first overseas base in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa and support facilities at Gwadar and Hambantota and its maritime silk route project has created apprehensions about China's long term intentions of China in the region. Japan and China also have significant strategic tension particularly on Senkaku islands.

Therefore, the three democracies broadly share their complementary objectives of an open, stable, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific Region. The trilateral relationship has further progressed with the revival of the 'Quad' in 2017 which seems to be progressing gradually as a consultative mechanism at this stage. However, the trilateral between Delhi, Tokyo and Washington has been cautious, maintaining a careful balance and underplaying any balancing or containment signal to China. Making a summit meeting like 'JAI' a regular event in future will formalize the cooperative relations. For a robust, multidimensional partnership to develop the countries should broaden the focus beyond strategic issues. The leaders of the three countries are set to meet in Osaka, Japan later this month for the G20, 2019 summit. In the coming time given the tricky geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific with complex and at times competitive interest of regional and global players, India-Japan-US would be crucial trilateral to look forward to in the region.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

End Notes

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