



Australia-Japan-United States Trilateral Strategic Dialogue: An Assessment

*Dr. Pragya Pandey**

The Minister for Foreign Affairs of Australia, Julie Bishop, the Foreign Minister of Japan Taro Kono, and the Secretary of State for the US, Michael R. Pompeo met in Singapore on August 4, 2018, for the eighth ministerial meeting of the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD). The dialogue was held on the sidelines of the 51st ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting, ASEAN+3 and ARF meeting. The TSD between US, Japan and Australia had started initially at the level of senior officials in 2002 and later elevated to the Foreign Ministers level in 2006. Over the years the dialogue has been taken forward by the participants as a platform which brings together the three democracies and developed economies of the region, committed to the common cause of stability and security¹ in the wider Indo-Pacific region.

Key takeaways of 2018 Singapore meeting, as highlighted in the Joint Statement include the following:

- The ministers underscored their commitment for a free, open, prosperous and inclusive Indo-Pacific region
- Centrality of ASEAN led structures was reiterated. Interestingly, the significance of Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Pacific Island Forum (PIF) was also highlighted.²
- Emphasizing on maritime security and safety the members welcomed ongoing trilateral cooperation on capacity building in Southeast Asia. Expressing serious concerns about developments in the South China Sea (SCS) they acknowledged recent progress movement towards an acceptable Code of Conduct (CoC)
- On North Korea, which has been a longstanding issue of discussion at the dialogue; the ministers welcomed the US-North Korea Singapore Summit, and reiterated international community's need to achieve final and fully verifiable denuclearization of North Korea.

- The ministers welcomed the trilateral partnership for infrastructure investment in the Indo-Pacific to promote economic growth and address developmental challenges.

An Assessment of the Trilateral Relationship

Over the years the trilateral security relationship among the US, Japan, and Australia has emerged as one of the most robust cooperative relationships in the region. The strong trilateral relationship is rooted in strong bilateral relationships. All the three countries are in bilateral security agreements with each other. Both Australia and Japan have been long-standing allies of US. The Australia and Japan strategic partnership began with the signing of the *Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation* in 2007. The Australian and the Japanese foreign and defense ministers also meet for “two-plus-two” consultations annually. Both the countries have signed an *Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA)* in January 2017, to facilitate defence cooperation. On the other hand, Australia and US are celebrating 100 years of their relationship. Being a close ally of US, Australia has hosted US defence personnel for long. Efforts are being made for full implementation of Force Posture Initiative which includes a plan for rotational presence of the 2500 US Marine Corps in Darwin, Australia. In addition, the three countries have also signed a ‘Trilateral Information Sharing Arrangement (TISA) in October 2016, to expedite closer defence cooperation.

Maritime security remains one of the central pillars for this trilateral relationship. The Ministers at the dialogue reiterated their ‘opposition to unilateral coercive actions of any country’, which may alter the status quo in the SCS and called for respect for the UNCLOS. China has been locked in long-standing disputes with neighboring Southeast Asian countries in SCS and with Japan over Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea. China’s rejection of the 2016 The Hague Tribunal’s decision on Philippines vs. China case further created concerns about its intentions. China has been critical of US’ interference in the SCS disputes and has argued for the disputes to be resolved bilaterally among the parties concerned. On the other hand, the US, although it maintains neutrality has been vocal about need to maintain freedom of navigation in the region and supportive of Japan on the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu.

An important recent development in the relationship has been the trilateral infrastructure investment partnership. 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. The Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced initial US’ investment of US\$113 million for the partnership project. OPIC has currently invested US\$4 billion across the Indo-Pacific in different projects in energy, financial and agricultural services sectors. Pompeo argued that Trump Administration’s decision to pull out of TPP should not create doubts about America’s vision in the Indo-Pacific.³The investment partnership is being popularly seen as an apparent attempt to counter growing influence of China with its Belt Road Initiative. As Mike Pompeo said “we do not seek domination in the Indo-

Pacific, and will oppose any country that does".⁴ Earlier the *US National Security Strategy 2017* had expressed concern about China's infrastructure investments, trade strategies and rapid military modernization, all of which reinforce its geopolitical aspirations and undermine regional stability.⁵ However, the Japanese and Australian sides clearly denied that the initiative is to counter or balance China.

In terms of the regional security architecture, an emphasis on IORA and PIF along with ASEAN shows that the partnership will not be restricted to East Asia and South East Asia but will focus on the wider Indo-Pacific region, and these multilateral platforms will facilitate cooperation among the players.

Shared democratic values and strategic concerns of the three countries have held them together. Both Japan and Australia have a shared interest in keeping the US engaged in the region. Since the beginning China has been apprehensive of the dialogue as a balancing tactic directed against it, more so in the light of India-US-Japan-Australia consultations popularly referred as the 'Quad'.

The trilateral dialogue provides an opportunity for the participants to utilize common values and interests to enhance security cooperation among the members, and at the same time also to create a suitable regional balance of power. In conclusion, it can be said that amidst the changing geopolitical landscape overall the vehicle of TSD is seems to be driven by the strategic interests of the participants. The challenges from non-state actors' remains a crucial concern at the dialogue but traditional security concerns continue to be more important.

** Dr. Pragya Pandey, Research Fellow, Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.
Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

End Notes

¹ Trilateral Strategic Dialogue Joint Statement, Australia-Japan-United States, 18 March 2006, Sydney, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/australia/joint0603-2.html>

² Australia-Japan-United States Trilateral Strategic Dialogue Joint Ministerial Statement, 05 August 2018, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/08/284940.htm>

³ Michael R. Pompeo. Secretary of State's Remarks on "America's Indo-Pacific Economic Vision" ,US Chamber of Commerce,30 July 2018, <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2018/07/284722.htm>

⁴ I.bid

⁵ United States, National Security Strategy December 2017, p. 46, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>