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Executive Summary

This past July, the US, Japan and India conducted the annual MALABAR naval exercises in the Bay of Bengal. The MALABAR exercises, along with Japan's inclusion as a permanent member in 2015, have been the watermark of a rapidly improving trilateral relationship between Delhi, Tokyo and Washington. But MALABAR exercises, despite their importance, are not sufficient to drive forward the trilateral relationship. The US and Japan continue to drive forward this relationship and press India, which has been traditionally hesitant to formalize strategic relations perceived by some in the region as a 'quasi-alliance', for stronger integration. While Delhi continues to be cautious on rapidly deepening trilateral – and potentially quadrilateral with Australia – relations with Washington and Tokyo, this trend is dynamic especially as geopolitical tensions ebb and flow with China. In sum, policymakers in India, the US and Japan should be cognizant of the limitations and pace of trilateral cooperation but should continue apace on niche areas of cooperation related to their shared security challenges in the Indo-Pacific

The strategic convergence between the US, Japan and India continues to gain currency in the Indo-Pacific amidst rising tensions in the maritime domain and growing concern on the contours of China's rise. The bedrock of any good trilateral relationship is not sustained however only by shared concerns but rather continues to be defined by purposeful bilateral relations between its members. In this light, despite imperfections, there has been a positive trajectory over the past several years in the web of bilateral ties between Delhi, Tokyo and Washington. This has been most visually demonstrated through the giant bear hug Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi gave to US President Donald Trump during their first summit meeting this past Juneⁱ. But, there has also been significant traction gained through the warm relationship between Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Modi.ⁱⁱ Thus far, Abe has also skillfully managed an uncertain and critical relationship with the US after Trump's surprising election victory last November.

But while bilateral relations have been progressing, there has not been a big step forward yet on the trilateral front. On the diplomatic front, trilateral relations crossed an important threshold in September 2015 with the inaugural US-Japan-India Trilateral Ministerial Dialogue, which took place on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) meetings in New York. This was subsequently followed by a second meeting of the foreign ministers this fall – also on the sidelines of the UNGA.ⁱⁱⁱ This meeting was more of a diplomatic introduction though rather than fluid continuation as both Japan and the United States have had changes (now US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Japan’s Foreign Minister Taro Kono) at the Foreign Minister level since the 2015 meeting. Indian Minister of External Affairs Shushma Swaraj is the only remaining minister from the inaugural meeting.

Despite political changes however, trilateral relations have continued to grow since 2015 and increase their focus especially on maritime security issues. According to a US read-out of the meeting, the three sides, “discussed the importance of a free and open Indo-Pacific region underpinned by a resilient, rules-based architecture that enables every nation to prosper.^{iv} The ministers also affirmed the importance of the freedoms of navigation and overflight and the free flow of lawful commerce in the region and around the globe, including in the South China Sea.” In addition to the up-front focus on maritime security – Washington, Tokyo and Delhi also stressed cooperation on the escalating tensions on the Korean peninsula. Earlier this year India pledged to ban all remaining trade with the North Korea and also cut off access to training which was previously provided to a number of North Korean scientists and technical experts.

Japan and India’s Embrace

A key facilitator to trilateral cooperation is the growing bond between Japan and India. In September, Japan’s Prime Minister Shinzo Abe concluded a two-day summit trip to India, a move that continues to enhance the rapidly growing strategic nexus between Tokyo and Delhi.^v During the visit, Abe met with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and agreed to a number of key deals on economic and investment cooperation, in addition to joint work on security and defense. Regional geopolitics also continue to shape the strategic shifts in thinking as both sides remain concerned about China’s growth and push outside its borders, evidenced by initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

Abe’s trip to Delhi was another sign of Japan’s growing embrace of its relationship with India – which Tokyo sees as a crucial geopolitical balancer amidst rising assertiveness from China and growing uncertainty of the role of the US over the long-term. The summit in Delhi also comes with an interesting historical marker – ten years from the time of Abe’s visit to India during his first reign as Japan’s Prime Minister in 2006-7. At that time Abe remarked on how Japan and India were natural partners through the “confluence of two seas” – the Pacific and Indian oceans.^{vi} This theme of connectivity in the maritime sphere has grown stronger over the years and both sides agreed, in a joint statement, to align their two regional strategies: Japan’s Open and Free Indo-Pacific Strategy and India’s Act East Policy.

On the economic front, Modi and Abe inked a number of agreements – the most significant being the announcement to commence operations on the Mumbai-Ahmedabad High Speed Rail (MAHSR) project – a massive \$17 billion infrastructure project which will largely be funded by Japan through long-term and low interest loans. High-speed rail cooperation remains a foundation of the investment relationship going forward and success on the project could lead to more connectivity rail projects for Japan in the coming years. The two sides also agreed to move forward on cooperation regarding civil nuclear energy – after concluding an agreement that went into force this past July.

On the security and defense side, Tokyo and Delhi are also progressing at a quick pace with some progress on finalizing India's long-delayed plans to purchase Japan's US-2 amphibious plane – a move that would be a strong building block for more defense cooperation in the coming years. The security and defense cooperation is also helped by recently concluded the annual MALABAR naval exercises, alongside the US, earlier this summer which helps Japan and India on their joint operational postures.

Steady Progress Between Washington and Delhi

The trajectory of the US-India relationship is also helping to push forward trilateral ties with Japan. Ties between Washington and Delhi have been moving forward despite sustained concerns on Trump's commitment to a comprehensive approach to the region. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi phoned President Donald Trump shortly after his election victory and noted that he looked "forward to taking the relationship to new strategic heights". Indeed, despite some hiccups, India and US strategic relations also progressed under Obama's watch, who was extended the same courtesy as Abe when invited to be the special state guest for India's Republic Day ceremonies in 2015 – the first such offer to a US leader. During that time, Obama and Modi framed the US-India relationship as a "natural and global partnership" and struck numerous deals on investment, defense and climate change issues.^{vii}

During Modi's summit meeting with Trump this past June, both leaders remarked on the importance of taking the US-India relationship to the next level. Trump specifically noted the "importance of the security relationship...in the vast Indo-Pacific".^{viii} Meanwhile, Modi explained the natural synergies in the region: "In the Indo-Pacific region, in order to maintain peace, stability, and prosperity in the region, this is also another objective of our (US-India) strategic cooperation in this area. The increasing possibilities for enhancing cooperation in order to protect our strategic interests will continue to determine the dimensions of our partnership. We will continue to work with the USA in this region."^{ix}

The Trump-Modi visit was followed up on the security side with a visit from US Defense Secretary James Mattis to Delhi in September. During this visit, Mattis and his counterpart Indian Defense Minister Nirmala Sitharaman praised the growth of their defense relationship and demonstrated alignment over President Trump's plans to enhance US efforts to stabilize Afghanistan. The defense relationship between India and the US has always been understated – largely due to the fact that there is no formal alliance or alignment structure between the two. Despite this however, the US continues to conduct a significant amount of bilateral and trilateral military exercises with India. Washington has also labeled India as a "major defense partner" – a clear indication of its desire to take the relationship to the next level.^x

Tokyo and Washington in the Trump Era

Since Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe took office in December 2012, Tokyo has undergone a dramatic evolution of its security architecture aimed at shoring up national defense capabilities but also enhancing the role and seamlessness of the US-Japan alliance. Some of the highlights of the past five years include: a new National Security Council, a National Security Strategy^{xi}, a relaxation on arms exports to friendly countries, stronger protection on classified materials and a reinterpretation of Japan's constitutional right to collective self-defense. Most of these initiatives serve a dual-purpose: to retro-fit Japan's antiquated security architecture and to bolster the US-Japan alliance which has been inhibited over the years in its evolution due to Tokyo's own limited roles and responsibilities – framed around its "pacifist" constitution - in defense and security matters.

Perhaps one of the most critical of these changes was the revised bilateral defense guidelines, released in April 2015, between Washington and Tokyo. Through these updated reforms, the US and Japan looked to retrofit their alliance in order to address a security environment, in the region that is both increasingly dynamic and threatening, in a seamless manner. Specifically, both sides agreed to create an Alliance Coordination Mechanism (ACM) to streamline and optimize operational crisis management.^{xiii} The ACM replaced the ineffective and cumbersome Bilateral Coordination Mechanism (BCM) from earlier defense guidelines. The BCM's threshold for activation was far too high and thus was never utilized by Tokyo and Washington. In contrast, the new ACM is a constantly active whole-of-government exchange between both sides which better allows the alliance to respond to fast-moving challenges in the region, such as North Korea's destabilizing missile tests and China's increasing assertiveness in the maritime domain, especially the East and South China Seas.

The election of Donald Trump as US President stunned the international community and Japanese policymakers and officials were no exception to this. From an alliance perspective, Tokyo was concerned about Trump's surprising and brazen comments on burden-sharing equities within the alliance during his campaign. During the presidential election campaign, Trump made some concerning statements regarding the value of alliances and questioned the equity in burden sharing between the US and its allies. Some of these comments were directed specifically at Washington's relations with key Asian allies, including Japan and South Korea.

But, while there continues to be uncertainty about the Trump administration in Tokyo, concerns of alliance drift have been dwindling after reassuring visits and dialogue between Prime Minister Abe and President Trump, in addition to growing trust on key advisors such as Mattis and US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. Abe feels emboldened – and indeed even opportunistic - in his attachment to the US alliance after his summits with Trump and has been largely pleased with the President's strong commitments to Tokyo on security matters. During their first official summit meeting in February meeting, Trump re-iterated US longstanding policy that the Senkaku islands^{xiii} – part of a bitter territorial row with China – remain under the umbrella of the US-Japan Security Treaty. Similarly, for the first time in decades – the US has explicitly indicated, via the joint statement, that a range of capabilities covers Japan's defense, including nuclear weapons.^{xiv} This public statement of reassurance further bolsters extended deterrence in the region and will work to soothe fears in Tokyo about potential drift in the alliance under Trump, especially amidst rising tensions on the Korean peninsula.

Looking for Growth: Opportunities and Challenges

Therefore, the three bilateral dynamics that make up the US-Japan-India trilateral all continue to grow despite their imperfections. How will this transcend to the trilateral level? The enhancement in scope and purpose of the MALABAR exercises is a positive sign and it is also noteworthy that the three sides are making a point to separately reference the trilateral relationship even during their bilateral summits and press gatherings. For example, during the Mattis visit to India, he noted : “The U.S.-India Malabar Naval Exercise that the minister mentioned is one with Japan, and an example what a deepening shared trust and operational cooperation.” Meanwhile, Sitharaman stressed: “This edition of Malabar demonstrated the progress made in operational synergies between our navies.” Moreover, during the Japan-India summit in September – both sides agreed in a Joint Statement to “strengthen trilateral cooperation frameworks with the United States, Australia and other countries.”^{xv}

The challenge moving forward will be for India to move beyond its reservations of a more formalized structure and increase tangible cooperation with the US and Japan, while still maintaining its balance at home and preference to avoid alignments. Of course, the perceptions of Beijing – with

which India continues to feud with on a range of issues – still continue to be important to India and Delhi will continue to balance and calibrate its integration with the US and Japan alongside its natural desire to engage with China. This allergy of alignment and concern regarding China’s reaction has thus far prevented India from agreeing to resuscitate talks of a Quadrilateral Dialogue with Australia.

Currently, there is a web of trilateral – in addition to the existing bilateral and multilateral – relationships that are enhancing the interconnectedness of the Indo-Pacific region. The principal examples of this are: the US-Japan-Australia grouping, the US-Japan-India grouping and the Japan-India-Australia grouping. While a merger of these groups may make sense to ease bureaucratic time-schedules and synergize efforts, there are also advantages smaller-knit groups with greater focus and operational activity.

On the quadrilateral with Australia, moves continue to be slow in real terms - but there is much more discussion to make this a reality behind closed doors. Australia, which was once reticent on joining, is much more eager now and their Defence Minister Marise Payne made it clear that Canberra is ready at this past year's Shangri la Dialogue.^{xvi} Of course, there are hurdles and India remains hesitant to join a "quasi alliance" that could harm its relations with Beijing, but as geopolitics change so does regional alignment. As rising tensions with China - evidenced most recently over the Doklam plateau in Bhutan - grow, India may see itself work more closely with the US, India and Japan in a formalized quadrilateral framework.

ⁱ White House, “Remarks by President Trump and Prime Minister Modi of India in Joint Press Statement,” June 26, 2017.

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/06/26/remarks-president-trump-and-prime-minister-modi-india-joint-press>

ⁱⁱ MOFA Japan, “Japan-India Summit,” July 7, 2017. http://www.mofa.go.jp/s_sa/sw/in/page3e_000696.html

ⁱⁱⁱ Ankit Panda, “US, Japan, India Hold Trilateral Ministerial Meeting on UN Sidelines,” *the Diplomat* September 19, 2017. <https://thediplomat.com/2017/09/us-japan-india-hold-trilateral-ministerial-meeting-on-un-sidelines/>

^{iv} US State Department, “Secretary of State Tillerson's Participation in the Second U.S.-India-Japan Ministerial-level Trilateral Dialogue,” September 18, 2017. <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/09/274224.htm>

^v MOFA Japan, “Japan-India Summit,” September 14, 2017. http://www.mofa.go.jp/s_sa/sw/in/page3e_000747.html

^{vi} MOFA Japan, “Confluence of the Two Seas - Speech by H.E.Mr. Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan at the Parliament of the Republic of India,” August 22, 2007. <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>

^{vii} White House, “The Highlights of President Obama's Visit to India,” January 26, 2015.

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2015/01/26/highlights-president-obamas-visit-india>

^{viii} White House, “Remarks by President Trump and Prime Minister Modi of India in Joint Press Statement,” June 26, 2017.

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/06/26/remarks-president-trump-and-prime-minister-modi-india-joint-press>

^{ix} Ibid.

^x US Department of Defense, “Secretary Mattis Joint Press Conference with Minister of Defence Nirmala Sitharaman,” September 26, 2017. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1325283/secretary-mattis-joint-press-conference-with-minister-of-defence-nirmala-sithar/>

^{xi} Japan’s Cabinet Office, “National Security Strategy,” December 2013.

<https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryoku/131217anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf>

^{xii} Ministry of Defense (Japan), “The Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation,” April 27, 2015.

http://www.mod.go.jp/e/d_act/anpo/shishin_20150427e.html

^{xiii} MOFA Japan, “US-Japan Joint Statement,” February 2017.

<http://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000227768.pdf>

^{xiv} Ibid.

^{xv}US Department of Defense, “Secretary Mattis Joint Press Conference with Minister of Defence Nirmala Sitharaman,” September 26, 2017. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1325283/secretary-mattis-joint-press-conference-with-minister-of-defence-nirmala-sithar/>

^{xvi}Ministry of Defence (Australia), “Minister for Defence - 16th IISS Asia Security Summit: The Shangri-La Dialogue,” June, 2016. <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/speeches/minister-defence-16th-iiss-asia-security-summit-shangri-la-dialogue>