

## Emerging Australia-Japan-US Maritime Security Cooperation

Akshita Mathur\*

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Japan will join a major United States - Australia combined military exercise *Talisman Saber* for the first time. It is seen as a growing sign of developing security links between the three countries as tensions rise over China's island building in the South China Sea. Earlier, the *Talisman Saber* involved biennial joint drills by the Australian Defense Force and the United States Military in at least six locations in northern and central Australia. This is the sixth such exercises and with previous exercises having taken place in 2005, 2007, 2009, 2011 and 2013. This biennial exercises will include maritime operations, amphibious landings, Special Forces tactics and urban warfare. The three nations have also voiced their concerns about freedom of navigation and over-flight in the disputed South China Sea.

### Evolution of the Trilateral

Examining the past and present of trilateral cooperation among the United States, Japan, and Australia illustrates how each country's national security strategy has evolved during the post-Cold War period. The United States has shifted along the scope of regional and global emphasis; Japan has steadily sharpened its national defence policy with an increasing focus on the Far East; and Australia has embraced a more active regional and global security cooperation role. These changes have influenced and in many ways increased the salience of trilateral cooperation mechanisms such as the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD) and the Security and Defense Cooperation Forum (SDCF), bringing them at the forefront of ongoing and future trilateral policy coordination.

The trilateral cooperation was also highlighted during the 2015 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore. In a joint statement, US, Japan and Australia underscored their shared interests such as peace, stability, and respect for international law, freedom of navigation and over flight and unimpeded commerce in the East China and South China Seas.

### **Trilateral Cooperation in Regional Framework**

Political and security cooperation among Australia, Japan, and the United States has grown during the last decade. The United States has long maintained formal bilateral alliances with Japan and Australia, along with the Philippines, South Korea and Thailand. It has also given boost to its security partnerships with Singapore and India, among others. Nonetheless, the quality of its relations with its allies i.e. Australia and Japan, is distinct. While Australia and Japan do not have a formal alliance relationship, their alignment has grown strong and leaders claim a ‘special relationship.’ Thus, the relationship between Australia, Japan and the United States is now based on three key components: (a) the Australia-US and Japan-US formal bilateral alliances; (b) the intensifying Australia-Japan ‘special relationship’; and (c) the expanding trilateral security relationship. Australia, Japan and the United States have shaped each of these layers of regional architecture by incorporating a variety of individual, bilateral and trilateral approaches. These countries provide strategic assets in the region and increasingly share goals in coordinating security policies. These countries have not only enhanced functional cooperation with some regional countries on select ‘non-traditional’ security issues such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) and coordination of pandemic responses, but have also increasingly formed a sphere for traditional alliance networking and regional institution building.

Bilateral and trilateral cooperation among these three countries has the potential to become a catalyst for regional security architecture building. These countries have the capacity-building assets needed for facilitating regional stability and for realizing their shared sense of identity and mission. The trilateral relationship can become a core component for a larger regional cooperative security framework. The rapid transformation of Japan’s security behavior in the legal and policy realms also demands greater attention. This transformation could be a catalyst for changing the nature of

security interactions among states in East Asia. Over time, Australia-Japan-US operational cooperation could be widened to incorporate ASEAN countries, India, South Korea and other allies and partners of the three countries. Within this framework, greater security role by Japan could be more acceptable to its neighbors. To realize this vision of mitigating geopolitical rivalries in East Asia, Australia, Japan and the United States have to ensure that the trilateral cooperation fits logically within the bigger picture of a more inclusive and flexible regional security order and architecture. This trilateral relationship should not aim to merely apply pressure or appear as a threat in the region, rather it should facilitate cooperation by providing public goods and facilitating peace and prosperity across the Asia-Pacific region. Ideally, trilateral security cooperation among the three countries should enhance all three components of security cooperation in ways that increase positive interactions with China and other emerging powers.

\* The author is a Research Associate at the National Maritime Foundation, New Delhi. The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the National Maritime Foundation. She can be reached at [akshita.mathur27@gmail.com](mailto:akshita.mathur27@gmail.com).