

## The not-quite-quadrilateral

Australia, Japan and India

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Trilateralism is on the rise across the Asia–Pacific as states seek safety in numbers, diversifying their relations in response to an increasingly uncertain regional security environment. On 8 June 2015, senior foreign affairs officials from Australia, Japan and India, including secretary-level representatives, gathered in New Delhi to explore how the three nations might work together to meet shared regional challenges; maritime security topped the agenda.<sup>1</sup> Following the meeting—the first of its kind—Japan’s Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs, Akitaka Saiki, stated that the three nations ‘are on the same page’ with regard to China’s ‘aggressive attitude’,<sup>2</sup> while Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Secretary Peter Varghese undercut suggestions that the trilateral meeting could be considered an ‘anti-China front’.<sup>3</sup>



Source: Visible Earth, NASA.

The three countries last cooperated on security matters alongside the US in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, which wrapped up in 2008 at the behest of Australia's newly elected Rudd government because of concern about China's reaction. That the three have now reconvened security-focused discussions (with potential spin-off naval activities) speaks not only to a shared understanding of China's rise and the challenges of regional security, but also to their collective willingness to play a greater role in Asia-Pacific security matters.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzō Abe and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi share a deep personal chemistry. Both are conservative, nationalist, pro-business leaders who came to power pledging to rejuvenate their flagging economies and restore national pride. Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott is cut from similar cloth, and has quickly built close relations with his Japanese and Indian counterparts.

Indeed, beyond personal qualities and close relationships at the head-of-state level, there's a growing alignment of interests, values and concerns among Australia, Japan and India. All share an interest in preserving a peaceful and stable regional order and avoiding a *Pax Sinica*. All value democracy, freedom and the rule of law. And all are concerned by China's military build-up, defiance of international law and norms and increasingly assertive attempts to unilaterally force a shift in the regional status quo. While it's important to recognise that the three nations are very different beasts, this broad strategic convergence presents a unique opportunity to the leaders and their nations.

This paper explores the extent to which the current strategic alignment between Australia, Japan and India offers a sound basis for deepening cooperation to reinforce the rules-based regional order. It concludes that an alignment of the political stars, a diplomatic consensus on China and a tightening of bilateral relations mean that Australia should now lean forward to fortify our trilateral dialogue and cooperation with Japan and India, so contributing to the stable and open region in which our American ally continues to play a significant role. A coalition of like-minded Asia-Pacific maritime democracies would seek to balance against China, further complicate China's strategic calculus and encourage Beijing to engage as a responsible stakeholder in the existing rules-based order.

## The facts on the ground

The Asia-Pacific is the world's fastest growing region and one of immense strategic and economic importance to the international system. Its regional order is characterised by bilateralism and weak institutions, and nationalism is an increasingly potent regional currency. The growth of Asian economies has rapidly transformed strategic relativities across the Asia-Pacific. The region's security architecture has 'long been defined by two sets of arrangements: a US-centred set of alliance arrangements, and an ASEAN-centred set of institutions'.<sup>4</sup> As questions about the durability of America's role in the Asia-Pacific linger, a deep strategic mistrust washes over broad swathes of the region as states look to balance their cooperative and competitive instincts vis-à-vis China. And in response to the return of geopolitics and growing strategic competition, nations of the region are ratcheting up defence spending and pushing to modernise their militaries in preparation for what may be a less stable regional security environment down the line.

## The US and China

For over six decades, the US has maintained primacy in the Asia-Pacific, where its security provider status has helped underwrite a stable and peaceful regional order in which Asian nations have been able to rise and prosper. In November 2011, US President Barack Obama stood before the Australian Parliament to deliver a speech intended to resonate in capitals across the region. In announcing the US rebalance to the Asia-Pacific, Obama flagged his plan to consolidate and magnify the US's presence in the region, signalling a shift in America's regional strategic focus from the Middle East and Europe to East and South Asia. 'The United States is a Pacific power, and we are here to stay,' Obama affirmed.<sup>5</sup>

Obama's rebalance leans on diplomatic, economic and security levers to reorient America's focus and consciousness to the Asia-Pacific. The policy was designed, in part, to assuage the concerns of regional allies and partners that America's commitment would remain strong and true despite its global commitments and a biting budgetary climate that put pressure on defence spending. While the initiative has suffered from being seen as politically underpowered, it has nonetheless been materially underway, including through some important defence posture initiatives such as the rotational deployment of US Marines through Darwin. Indeed, while the rebalance was intended to unfold through military, economic, diplomatic and institution-building efforts, the military aspect has been the best resourced.

Some see the rebalance as a move to protect US primacy in the Asia-Pacific from the challenge posed by a rising China. Former Australian prime minister Kevin Rudd recently wrote for *Time*: 'China will be the dominant economic power in Asia, and it will seek to translate that power, through an activist foreign policy, into geopolitical influence and a new global order.'<sup>6</sup> And so it is. On the back of phenomenal economic growth, China is pursuing its ambitions to modernise its military and establish a sphere of influence in the Asia-Pacific. It's working to push the US out of the region by eroding US military primacy and power and raising the cost of intervention, leaving an 'Asia for Asians'.<sup>7</sup>

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The 'peaceful rise' advocated by Hu Jintao has fallen away under the leadership of Xi Jinping, who has pursued a more muscular foreign policy since taking office in 2013. The examples are numerous: the unilateral declaration of an air defence identification zone over a large area of the East China Sea, the installation of a state-owned oil rig in Vietnam's exclusive economic zone, the occupation of Scarborough Shoal (claimed by the Philippines) and the frenetic land reclamation efforts to transform reefs and rocks in the South China Sea into islands complete with airstrips, ports and buildings. In an effort to reform the regional order and upset the status quo, China is challenging international rules and global norms through a coercive, provocative and damaging campaign that continues to raise tensions and unsettle many in the region and beyond.

China's rise is America's central strategic challenge, and Beijing's increasing bellicosity and brinksmanship are of great concern to its Asia-Pacific neighbours.

## Abe and Japan

China's rise and the relative decline of US power in the Asia-Pacific have done much to shape Japan's conception of, and response to, the increasingly complex regional threat environment. Prime Minister Shinzō Abe has stated that 'Japan's top foreign policy priority must be to expand the country's strategic horizons',<sup>8</sup> and Brad Glosserman believes that Abe's central goal is the 'assertion and affirmation of Japan's global status as a "first-tier nation"'.<sup>9</sup> Beyond his domestic focus on reinvigorating the long-stagnant Japanese economy, Abe has energetically pursued a global yet Asia-focused agenda with such initiatives as the 'Arc of Freedom and Prosperity', 'Proactive Contribution to Peace' and 'Asia's Democratic Security Diamond'. Driving his agenda is an understanding that China remains Japan's main strategic competitor and threat; that the two are in dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea only reinforces Abe's activism.

Abe's recent manoeuvring on defence and security policy has been compelling: he has doubled-down on the Japan-US alliance, lifted Japan's self-imposed ban on arms exports, and overseen three consecutive years of increased defence spending—although, at a modest 1% of GDP, the allocation is more symbolism than substance. Most significant, however, have been Abe's efforts to normalise Japan's military posture and power by reinterpreting the constraints imposed by Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution,

which would permit Japan to play a more active and 'seamless' security role in the region and be better able to defend itself and its allies. Having garnered a landslide mandate at the snap election of December 2014, Abe has the political stability to continue his ambitious domestic agenda, redefine Japan's role in the world and confirm his country's commitment to the post-1945 rules-based international order.

## Modi and India

Narendra Modi was sworn in as Prime Minister of India on 26 May 2014, after his party gained the first decisive parliamentary majority since 1984 in the largest democratic election in history. Modi travelled extensively during his first year in office—an ambitious and indefatigable diplomat intent on selling India as a leading power and constructive contributor to the international order. Closer to home, he has pushed for an enhanced Indian role in the Asia–Pacific, reformulating the 1990s 'Look East' policy of former prime minister PV Narasimha Rao into a proactive 'Act East' policy. To that end, Modi has sought to weave a web of interest-driven security and diplomatic relationships across the Indian Ocean and Asia–Pacific. On taking office, he began to beef up India's defence force; he increased the defence budget by 11% in his first year, and has longer term plans to modernise the military by spending US\$150 billion by 2027.<sup>10</sup> Modi has focused on India's maritime power, particularly in the Indian Ocean, approving the building of seven frigates and six nuclear-powered submarines. Like previous Indian prime ministers, he has strategic ambitions to see India considered a top-tier nation and a leader in a multipolar world.

In his quest to cultivate a role for India as a serious security player and provider, Modi has not only pivoted to East Asia but also tilted to the US, symbolically inviting Obama to be the chief guest at India's Republic Day celebrations in January 2015.<sup>11</sup> The leaders later released a 'Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia–Pacific and Indian Ocean Region', along with a statement that married Modi's Look East policy with Obama's rebalance—a reflection of their tightening embrace and convergent strategic goals in the region. Obama has previously referred to the bilateral relationship as 'one of the defining partnerships of the 21st century',<sup>12</sup> and in a recent interview Modi went so far as to anoint the US and India as 'natural allies'.<sup>13</sup> It's a most remarkable endorsement from the leader of a nation that has traditionally conceived alliances to be 'mechanism[s] of entrapment and escalation'.<sup>14</sup> Modi's language is an important departure from the 'non-alignment' doctrine—the shibboleth of Indian strategic posturing—and represents another step from strategic autonomy to what Brewster calls 'strategic interconnectedness'.<sup>15</sup>

Behind Modi's eastward effort is an appreciation of growing Sino-Indian strategic rivalry. China's continued push into the Indian Ocean through infrastructure pledges, defence deals and submarine deployments and a simmering confrontation at the Line of Actual Control in the Himalayas (a hangover from the 1962 Sino-Indian war) have stoked old Indian fears of Chinese 'strategic encirclement'.<sup>16</sup> Modi has taken a stronger line on China, even if sometimes only implicitly. On his September 2014 visit to Japan, he remarked, 'Everywhere around us, we see an 18th-century expansionist mind-set: encroaching on another country, intruding in others' waters, invading other countries and capturing territory.'<sup>17</sup> The comments expanded on the frank counsel he offered to China while campaigning for office in the disputed territory of Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>18</sup> Still, Modi's China calculus reflects a pragmatic understanding that India reaps great economic benefits from a neighbour that simultaneously poses India's greatest long-term security threat.

## Abbott and Australia

Prime Minister Tony Abbott, a values-driven leader<sup>19</sup>, is seeking to calibrate Australia for the challenges of a century in which competition is set to intensify between our chief security partner, the US, and our most important trading partner, China. On the back of a successful G20 in Brisbane and a two-year term on the UN Security Council, Australia considers itself to be a 'top 20' nation with deep and enduring interests in a stable regional security environment. In the past 12 months, Canberra has concluded free trade agreements with Japan, South Korea and China, and the Abbott government has committed to raising defence spending to 2% of GDP by 2024 despite a tough fiscal environment. Abbott has worked to strengthen Australia's military ties in the Asia–Pacific, sending the ADF to join the Philippines and the US in Exercise Balikatan in the South China Sea, and both Japan and New Zealand will participate in July's Exercise Talisman Sabre, the two-yearly combined military drill between the US and Australia.<sup>20</sup>

According to the Prime Minister, the US–Australia alliance is one ‘for stability, for peace, for progress, for justice and it’s going to be a cornerstone of the stability of our region for many decades to come’.<sup>21</sup>

## Fitting Australia into Japan–India relations

Bilateral relations among Australia, Japan and India have deepened in recent years, laying the groundwork for a successful trilateral security mechanism.

### Japan and India

Relations between Japan and India, Asia’s largest and oldest democracies, have been reinvigorated over the past 12 months by an alignment of the political stars. Prime ministers Abe and Modi are conservative, nationalist leaders of populous democracies who came to power professing a commitment to transformational economic reform and the restoration of national pride. Both leaders are playing for a greater role in the Asia–Pacific and share apprehensions about China’s rise—historical tensions and territorial disputes abound. The personal rapport between them is striking: they appear to recognise each other’s energy and dynamism and the opportunity that their affiliation presents for their agendas, their nations and the Asia–Pacific.

Japan–India relations have typically been warm and strong, with no historical baggage to speak of. Shinzō Abe has long been a booster of the bilateral—in his 2006 book, he claimed that he wouldn’t be surprised if ‘in another decade Japan–India relations overtook US–Japan and Japan–China ties’.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, deeper Japan–India relations were one of the pet foreign policy priorities of Abe’s short first term, from September 2006 to September 2007. In December 2006, Abe and the then Prime Minister of India, Manmohan Singh, signed the Joint Statement Towards Japan–India Strategic and Global Partnership, establishing a deeper relationship with a strategic dimension and an upward trajectory. Come August 2007, Abe was in Delhi for a historic address to the Indian Parliament on the ‘Confluence of the Two Seas’—‘a dynamic coupling [of the Pacific and Indian oceans] as seas of freedom and of prosperity’.<sup>23</sup> He set out a new vision for Japan–India relations as a positive contributor to a ‘broader Asia’ on the basis of shared values and strategic interests.

While there are still sensitivities and bureaucracies to overcome in both Tokyo and Delhi, the deepening of the relationship looks set to continue alongside the growing Abe–Modi bonhomie.

Bilateral relations were maintained between Abe’s premierships, and his moves since his return to the top job give the impression that he’s back to finish what he started. In September 2014, Abe and Modi upgraded bilateral ties to a Special Strategic and Global Partnership—a testament to growing affinities and concerns and aligned values and ambitions. The Japanese and Indian foreign ministers continue to convene an annual strategic dialogue, as do the Japanese and Indian defence ministers. Japan and India continue to hold an annual 2+2 meeting of foreign and defence secretaries, which they are looking to ‘intensify’.<sup>24</sup> The Indian and Japanese navies—two of the world’s best—have conducted the bilateral JIMEX exercise since 2012, and continue to foster coastguard-to-coastguard cooperation. The relaxation of Japanese arms export laws has given India the opportunity to consider Japan’s military technologies, and both sides are now working through a range of issues to allow India’s purchase of Japan’s US-2 amphibious patrol aircraft. With the exception of an elusive civil nuclear cooperation deal, which remains a thorn in the side of the bilateral, Indo-Japanese relations have blossomed. While there are still sensitivities and bureaucracies to overcome in both Tokyo and Delhi, the deepening of the relationship looks set to continue alongside the growing Abe–Modi bonhomie.



Japanese Prime Minister Shinzō Abe (L) and Prime Minister Tony Abbott smile after signing the Japan-Australia Economic Partnership Agreement and Agreement on the Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology in the Mural Hall at Parliament House in Canberra, 8 July 2014. AAP Image/Getty Images Pool, Stefan Postles.

## Australia and Japan

The relationship between Australia and Japan has intensified since Tony Abbott's election in September 2013, but the trajectory of bilateral relations had been established for the better part of the past decade by the Howard government (the high-water mark was the March 2007 signing of the Japan–Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation). The Labor years between 2007 and 2013 brought sustained interest and effort. Abbott has proclaimed Japan to be 'Australia's best friend in Asia',<sup>25</sup> and 'a strong ally'<sup>26</sup> with which Australia has a 'special relationship'.<sup>27</sup> Japanese officials have similarly referred to Australia as a 'quasi-ally'. While the 'rhetoric outstrips the reality',<sup>28</sup> the claims speak to a unique closeness and are at the very least a sincere indication of the value and potential seen from Canberra and Tokyo. Importantly, closer strategic alignment between Japan and Australia deepens 'intra-spoke' relations, bolstering the US 'hub-and-spokes' regional alliance system.

The bilateral relationship had a busy 2014, with reciprocal prime ministerial visits, a fruitful iteration of the annual 2+2 consultation between defence and foreign ministers, and the announcement of the new Special Strategic Partnership for the 21st Century. The Australia–Japan Defence Co-operation Office was established in the Japanese Ministry of Defence in April 2014 to keep up with the unprecedented pace of activity. Most significant was the June 2014 bilateral agreement on the transfer of defence equipment and technology, which, coupled with Abe's domestic moves to relax defence export rules, opened the door for new and deeper defence cooperation.

As we prepare to decide on the replacement for our Collins-class submarines, Japan's Soryu-class boats currently lead the pack as the government's preferred procurement option, according to wide and regular reportage. For Japan, selling us the Kobe-built submarine would be significant because of the sensitivity of the technology and Japan's relatively new status as a defence

exporter. For Australia, the move could bring sizeable strategic baggage and benefits (as Davies and Schreer have explored at length<sup>29</sup>), as well as a raft of domestic political challenges. Cooperation with Japan on Australia's future submarine would be suffused with symbolism and give a fillip to bilateral defence and security ties.

## Australia and India

While the Australia–India relationship was 'elevated' to a strategic partnership in 2009, it began to develop a real strategic flavour only after the election of Narendra Modi. While prime ministers Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard made trips to Delhi in 2009 and 2012, respectively, Abbott's September 2014 visit—as Modi's first state guest—saw the relationship gather momentum. The two countries signed an agreement on civil nuclear cooperation, and Abbott indicated a 'desire for India to be in the first rank of Australia's relations'.<sup>30</sup> While in the country, Abbott was effusive in his praise of India, calling it 'the world's emerging democratic superpower', 'a model international citizen', and a 'friend to many' that 'threatens no one'.<sup>31</sup> Come November 2014, Modi tacked a state visit on to the end of his G20 debut in Brisbane; his was the first visit to Australia by an Indian Prime Minister in 28 years.

In a press statement at the time of his visit, Modi spoke of a 'natural partnership' between Australia and India 'emerging from our shared values and interests and strategic maritime locations'.<sup>32</sup> In an address to the Australian Parliament, he noted Australia to be one of India's 'foremost partners'<sup>33</sup> in the Asia–Pacific; he recognised that the Australia–India relationship had been underdone, and pledged that 'Australia will not be at the periphery of our vision, but at the centre of our thought'.<sup>34</sup> Five bilateral agreements were signed during Modi's visit, along with a pledge that a bilateral free trade agreement would be finalised in 2015.

But it was the Framework for Security Cooperation that was the visit's most substantive development. The accord instituted annual executive and ministerial meetings, regular maritime exercises, joint military training, defence technology sharing, and cooperation on such matters as counterterrorism, border protection and disaster management. It not only signified 'deepening



The Prime Minister of Australia Mr Tony Abbott with India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi during Mr Abbott's state visit to India, 5 September, 2014. Image courtesy Narendra Modi/Flickr.

and expanding security and defence engagement', but also signalled a new epoch of values-based security consultation and cooperation between the two nations. Australia and India are more closely aligned at the same time as, according to Modi, they 'stand together at a moment of enormous opportunity and great responsibility.'<sup>35</sup>

### Pitching the trilateral

The 8 June 2015 trilateral meeting in Delhi—led by senior officials including Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Secretary Peter Varghese, Japanese Vice Foreign Minister Akitaka Saiki and Indian Foreign Secretary Subrahmanyam Jaishankar—was a positive development that portends deeper strategic collaboration among the three nations. Australia is well positioned to seize upon the goodwill and personal rapport between prime ministers Abbott, Abe and Modi, along with the coalescing strategic, defence and security interests of the three countries, to develop a deep trilateral partnership focused on diplomatic and military activities. While Australia, Japan and India will have distinct agendas, the broad strategic convergence presents a unique opportunity for the three leaders and their nations. The success of such an initiative would turn on Australia's ability to harness the current momentum in order to develop and pursue a realistic agenda that protects and promotes an open rules-based order in the Asia-Pacific.

### What might it look like?

A trilateral between Australia, Japan and India could be developed through two primary mechanisms: dialogues and exercises. With trilateral senior officials meetings now underway, informal track 1.5 and track 2 dialogues should be held with representatives from think tanks, universities and the foreign policy and defence establishments of each country. Alongside these dialogues, the Australian Defence Minister could convene a meeting with the defence ministers of Japan and India to discuss issues of mutual concern and identify opportunities for collaboration. The Australian Foreign Minister could convene similar discussions with her Japanese and Indian counterparts. Such meetings are public statements that the three countries have overlapping interests in defence and foreign affairs and see value in making investments in their ministerial relationships. Moreover, hierarchy is important in Asia: if the trilateral is to have legs, it needs buy-in from senior Australian leaders.

Given the significant enthusiasm for bilateral relations among the three capitals, it might be possible to bypass separate meetings of foreign ministers and defence ministers and go straight to a joint meeting of foreign and defence ministers, or a 2+2+2. Australia employs the 2+2 format with a range of countries, including the US, the UK, Japan and South Korea. However, sensitivities remain in India, which conducts only one annual 2+2 with Japan at the senior official level, and has previously rebuffed suggestions of a 2+2 with the US out of concern about China's reaction. While a 2+2+2 would be a bold initiative for all three countries, the leaders may decide that it would be an appropriate step to invigorate the troika and highlight its potential.

Prime ministers Abbott, Abe and Modi should sustain their executive-level consultations. While each of the three bilaterals currently maintains annual prime ministerial meetings, wrangling time for a new stand-alone executive-level engagement would be likely to prove difficult. Instead, trilateral consultations could be arranged on the sidelines of annual multilateral groups in which all are parties: the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Regional Forum have the right flavour, and the G20 could be a useful backstop. In the early days, a head-of-state trilateral might be both easier to arrange and more palatable to the bureaucracies in Canberra, Tokyo and Delhi than would trilateral foreign or defence consultations or, indeed, a 2+2+2. After all, the geniality and energy exist at the prime ministerial level.

Military-to-military contacts are a practical and tangible trilateral pursuit. Given their strategic maritime locations across the Asia-Pacific, cooperation between Australia, Japan and India should focus on exercises at sea between the RAN, the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force and the Indian Navy. (Indeed, the trilateral discussions on 8 June indicated a desire to see progress to this end.<sup>36</sup>) Australia and Japan have overlapping interests in the maritime domain, just as Australia and India do; but it isn't entirely clear where the maritime interests of Japan and India meet. To shine a light on this uncertainty, the three nations should initially focus on sharing situational intelligence through anti-submarine warfare activities to develop a theatre-wide operating picture.



Such activities present an opportunity to develop interoperability and a shared understanding of naval capabilities; they should also illuminate where the troika's maritime interests intersect. That approach increases the likelihood that a cogent, valuable and sustainable maritime agenda can be developed. Beyond the maritime commons, the three countries should also look for opportunities to cooperate on cyber defence.

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### What's the point?

Trilateral cooperation between Australia, Japan and India is intended to support America's presence in the Asia-Pacific and demonstrate a public commitment to international law, global norms and the established regional order. A focus on defence and diplomacy is an opportunity to enhance relations, demonstrate a commitment to regional security and strengthen the security foundation on top of which diplomatic relations can deepen. Joint exercises demonstrate presence, build interoperability, boost inter-force relations based on trust, confidence and knowledge, and shape perceptions of shared security concerns. The activities pursued by the trio would nurture habits of cooperation between their militaries and solidify both the diplomatic agenda and relations between their heads of state and defence and foreign ministers, so uniting the three nations.

The three should convene as a coalition of like-minded democracies that stands for the established regional order and against unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force. The trilateral would create public goods in the Indian and Pacific oceans by sending a clear message in support of a peaceful Chinese rise and could work as part of a strategic bulwark against China's destabilising assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific. Cultivating forward-leaning trilateral cooperation would encourage behaviour that supports—not undermines—the regional order. The trilateral would seek to constrain China, not contain it.

As the world's predominant power, the US naturally assumes a heft of global responsibilities, which have recently included face-offs with Russian chauvinism in Ukraine and instability in the Middle East born of Islamic extremism. The corollary of multiplying crises, limited capacities and scarce resources is that Obama's strategic rebalance policy has remained underdeveloped. The White House understands this and has repeatedly encouraged greater cooperation between allies and partners in the Asia-Pacific.<sup>37</sup> For Obama, the deepening and broadening of that cooperation is a way to share the security burden; for allies and partners, it's an opportunity to buy into a cooperative security position stronger than they could sustain alone. Australia, Japan and India should do more together, more often.

While the strategic convergence between the three is based on a range of complementary factors, our nations are very different beasts, and a range of obstacles will naturally trouble trilateral cooperation. Australia is America's staunch Anglosphere ally in the Pacific. Japan is a former client state of the US and has an entrenched post-war tradition of pacifism. And India zealously protects its ability to make its foreign policy independently. The interests of the three partners may be broadly aligned, but they'll rarely, if ever, be homogeneous. The three countries have different order-building traditions and different strategic visions for the Asia-Pacific, and the benefits and risks for Japan and India will be very different from those for Australia. It's essential that these points of difference are kept in mind as a realistic trilateral agenda is reconciled and realised over coming years.

## Why Australia is well placed to initiate

Australia, Japan and India, three strategically located maritime democracies, share a timely alignment of interests, values and concerns. All want to preserve a stable and peaceful regional order governed by rules and norms. All share core values, including democracy, freedom and the rule of law. And all are concerned by China's military build-up and increasingly belligerent attempts to force a shift in the regional status quo. But beyond shared values, interests and concerns there are three core reasons why Australia is well positioned to deepen diplomatic and military relations in this trilateral.

First, Prime Minister Abbott appears to be looking for opportunities to shoulder more of the security burden with the US and to see Australia do its 'fair share' in preserving US primacy in the Asia-Pacific. The expectations of our American ally have naturally increased as the regional security situation has become increasingly fraught and America's global responsibilities continue to be diverse and demanding. To meet those expectations, Australia should find and take more opportunities to show conviction and willingness to act on regional security issues, as well as to do more with US allies and partners in the Asia-Pacific. Deepening trilateral engagement with Japan and India is a productive and proactive move in a warming regional security environment.

Second, there's been an observable shift in Canberra's rhetoric about China's assertiveness in the region. Former Australian Governments tended to temper their language when commenting on the actions of our most important trading partner, speaking in broad terms or not at all. The Abbott government has shown a willingness to speak out against China's actions, from the Foreign Minister's November 2013 rebuke of Beijing's declaration of its air defence identification zone in the East China Sea<sup>38</sup>, to Secretary of the Defence Department Dennis Richardson's frank characterisation of China's activities and intentions in the South China Sea<sup>39</sup>, to Defence Minister Kevin Andrews relaying Australia's opposition to 'coercive or unilateral actions' including 'any large scale land reclamation activity by claimants in the South China Sea' and concern at the 'prospect of militarisation of artificial structures'.<sup>40</sup> On 28 June 2015, Prime Minister Abbott offered his strongest intervention yet on developments in the South China Sea, saying that 'we take no side in the territorial disputes but we certainly deplore any unilateral alteration of the status quo'.<sup>41</sup> Pushing to develop a deeper relationship with Japan and India is a way to signal this firmer official position in a different forum and format.

Third, Australia has what Peter Hartcher calls 'the power of proposal'.<sup>42</sup> A passage from his 2014 Lowy paper is worth quoting at length:

As veteran Singaporean diplomat Chan Heng Chee argues: 'In the foreign policy world, big powers have weight—coercive, moral or political. But today even the superpower can't always get its way. You need a coalition of friends' to coalesce around a common purpose. But which coalition, for which purpose and in what form? 'Australia is a middle power and often comes up with ideas that are seen to be independent in overall posture' ...

Chan attaches two conditions. First, 'leadership is not just tabling an idea—it's the ability to convince others to support it, to get other countries on board ... Second, 'an idea needs to be independent. If Australia is seen to be acting on behalf of the US, your idea won't travel very far. But if it's seen to be in the interests of the region and of Australia, it's likely to be accepted.'

It's compelling to think that Australia can make unique contributions to the global order by virtue of our role and position in that order. Australia's moves to develop a coherent and realistic trilateral agenda that supports the prevailing US-led regional order could be one such contribution that finds strength in where it's coming from, what it aims to achieve, and who isn't involved.

## The benefits and risks for Australia

In proposing deeper trilateral engagement, it's essential to weigh the potential costs and benefits. They won't be the same for all the parties.

## Benefits

For Australia, the primary benefit of leading a trilateral with Japan and India is the opportunity it provides to pursue our interests and support our values. Our core strategic imperative is to sustain a secure, stable, prosperous and rules-based regional order in which our American ally continues to be deeply engaged. Australia is committed to freedom, international law, global norms, human rights, open markets, peaceful dispute resolution, liberal democratic ideals and governance, safeguarding maritime security and strengthening the region's security architecture. We maintain deep interests in the Pacific and Indian oceans, necessitating a 'more outward and engaged defence policy that aims to shape rather than just react to regional security developments'.<sup>43</sup> A trilateral would give us an opportunity to pursue our interests and propagate our values across the region with like-minded partners.

A trilateral also shows that we're willing to take on a greater and more public responsibility within our alliance and shoulder some of the regional security burden with like-minded liberal democracies. While there are occasionally doubts in both Canberra and Washington about each other's commitment to cooperation within the alliance<sup>44</sup>, a trilateral is a chance to come good on pledges to do more for America's role in the region in the face of Chinese assertiveness and bluster. To that end, a trilateral is a useful opportunity to deepen and diversify our security relationships on our own.

Deepening trilateral engagement also gives us an opportunity to demonstrate the independence of our foreign policy and strategic decision-making, confounding those critics who allege that our capacity to act is compromised by our alliance with the US.

Deepening trilateral engagement also gives us an opportunity to demonstrate the independence of our foreign policy and strategic decision-making, confounding those critics who allege that our capacity to act is compromised by our alliance with the US. In the same vein, an Australia-led trilateral is a chance to confirm for Beijing that our 'defence policy is made in Canberra'.<sup>45</sup> The trilateral will likely bring back memories—in China and in other nations—of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD). The QSD never really got off the ground back in 2006–07, and it crumbled in 2008 when the newly elected Rudd government backed out of it for fear that the group was perceived negatively in Beijing. Then Leader of the Opposition Tony Abbott was highly critical of Rudd's decision to walk away. Almost a decade down the track, the timbre of the Asia–Pacific has changed and it's important that Australia be seen to pursue a pragmatic and independent agenda. To do so is to 'avoid creating expectations in China that they have a veto on how we shape relations with their neighbours'.<sup>46</sup>

## Risks

Trilateral cooperation between Australia, Japan and India is likely to be seen as being aimed at China, and can be expected to be the subject of commentary from Chinese officials and media as its agenda develops. As Patrick Cronin notes, 'from China's perspective, any cooperation is encirclement'.<sup>47</sup> The trilateral therefore has the potential to affect Canberra's relations with Beijing: China can express dissatisfaction; it can also downgrade the China–Australia bilateral relationship to the detriment of Australian security and trade interests. However, the complex web of shared interests between the two countries reduces the likelihood of that outcome—after all, the pursuit of security and economic interests along separate tracks is no new thing in international affairs. Just as the success and continuity of the Australia–Japan–US trilateral didn't preclude the recent signing of the Australia–China Free Trade Agreement, the proposed Australia–Japan–India trilateral would be a beneficiary of continued decoupling of economic and strategic interests in the Sino–Australian relationship, governing the extent to which the bilateral is buffeted.

In any case, the risk of antagonising Beijing is not reason enough to eschew cooperation that serves Australian interests. Australian leaders have long shown a tendency to deny that our cooperation with our ally or with regional partners is ‘aimed at China’. In introducing Abe’s address to the Australian Parliament in July 2014, Abbott stated, ‘I stress, ours is not a partnership against anyone; it’s a partnership for peace, for prosperity and for the rule of law.’<sup>48</sup> And, as shown above, concern about China’s reaction contributed to the demise of the QSD. This sort of public reticence does a disservice to the broader project in which we seek to advance our national interests, deepen our security ties and contribute to regional security. Canberra’s coyness is certainly not reciprocated by Beijing, whose disruptive actions leave no doubt as to its desire to reshape the regional order to its own vision.

There may be an inherent terminological problem in referring to a trilateral of Australia, Japan and India as a ‘coalition of like-minded democracies’, given that other Asia–Pacific nations—such as South Korea and New Zealand—also subscribe to the trilateral’s values-driven organising principle. (This was also recognised as a potential downside to the QSD.<sup>49</sup>) However, those neighbours could be acknowledged in a trilateral ‘plus’ setting, and we can reason that we’re pushing forward with troika partners who feel an acute China-borne pressure and who are most prepared to line up and act to sustain regional stability. New Zealand maintained silence when China announced its air defence identification zone in the East China Sea, and South Korea has continually failed to speak out against Beijing’s actions in the South China Sea. Such policy positions lack robustness and fail to defend the established rules-based regional order.

There’s always a risk that the trilateral could fall apart as parties and politicians are voted out, as happened with the QSD. While Abe and Modi enjoy huge popular support and are expected to continue to lead their nations at least in the medium term, the incumbency of the Australian Prime Minister is not quite as safe or sure. Abbott’s domestic travails have lightened since the beginning of 2015, but our political environment remains somewhat capricious. To give the trilateral every chance of continuing success, it needs a strong trajectory and a place above party or factional politics. The best way to give it those things is to tie our participation to enduring national interests. For Australia to deepen the trilateral agenda only then to later pull out (a second time) would be a disaster, so it’s most important that the initiative be insulated from the vicissitudes of political life and leadership.

## Where to next?

The parley between Australia, Japan and India that kicked off in New Delhi on 8 June 2015 is an understandable and appropriate response to the vexed security situation that the three countries face in the Asia–Pacific. While this paper sets out how diplomatic signalling and military relations should deepen beyond that first step, the trilateral engagement on its own can’t be expected to change China’s strategic calculus to the point where Beijing emerges as a responsible stakeholder. Instead, the trilateral should simply be considered another tool to demonstrate to China that its destabilising campaign is out of step with regional expectations and that its neighbours will speak out and tighten their relations in response. Indeed, the trilateral proposed here would be complementary to the US–Japan–Australia foreign ministers’ trilateral, which has met since 2006, and the US–Japan–India senior officials’ trilateral, which has met since 2011. However, unlike those established dialogues, the Australia–Japan–India trilateral would find an inherent strength in the absence of the ‘threatening’ American leg.

But if this trilateral won’t tip the balance, a return to the QSD might be the next step. While the QSD lacked political momentum from the member capitals in its short life between 2006 and 2008, the idea has remained up for discussion over recent years. Indeed, the QSD was said to be on Modi’s agenda when he met with Abbott in November 2014<sup>50</sup> and with Obama in January 2015.<sup>51</sup> Having advocated for the QSD in his 2006–07 term only to see it wither, it was Abe’s acute sense of both shifting regional strategic balances and unfinished business that led him to pen a piece for *Project Syndicate* on ‘Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond’ upon his return to the top job in 2012. Abe wrote: ‘I envisage a strategy whereby Australia, India, Japan and the US state of Hawaii form a diamond to safeguard the maritime commons stretching from the Indian Ocean region to the western Pacific.’<sup>52</sup> It likely remains a goal for his prime ministership.

There are legitimate questions as to whether reconstituting the QSD would be necessary for four countries that already have strong bilateral relations and that are developing trilateral cooperation. But such moves simply reflect the region-wide tendency towards tightening bilateral and trilateral security-focused relations, implying that a return to quadrilateral or similar minilateral groupings will be likely to supplement the regional security architecture in the future.

While democratic politics make the alignment of the political stars between Abbott, Abe and Modi inherently temporary, we should embrace today's strategic convergence by deepening relations and nurturing linkages that can endure beyond the vagaries of political life. Intensive trilateral engagement between Australia, Japan and India would provide a sound foundation for a return to the QSD, or similar collective security mechanism, down the line.

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## Acronyms and abbreviations

ADF	Australian Defence Force
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
G20	Group of 20
GDP	gross domestic product
JIMEX	Japan–India Maritime Exercise
QSD	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue
RAN	Royal Australian Navy
UN	United Nations

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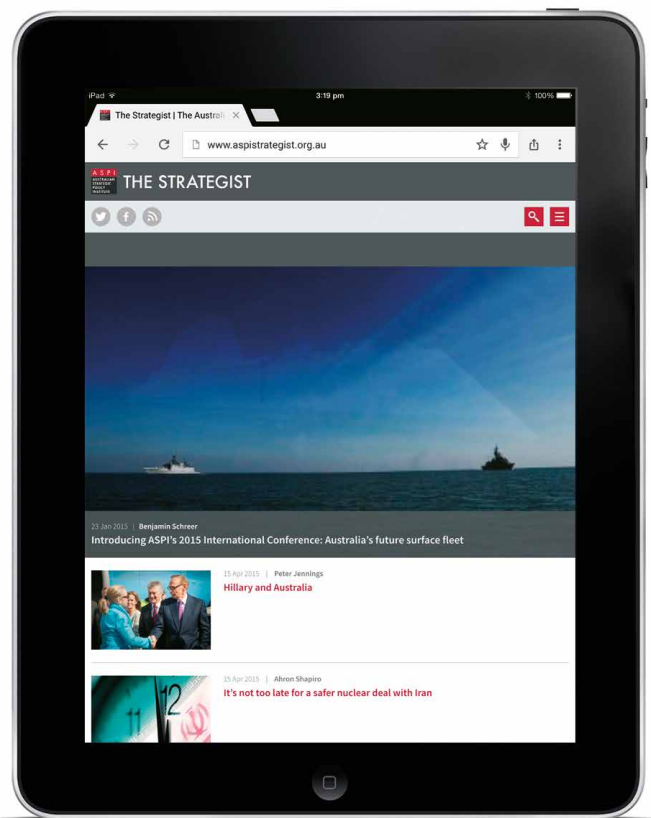
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