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India-Japan-U.S. Trilateral Dialogue Gains Additional Traction

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Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan and Sylvia Mishra, Senior and Junior Fellows at the Observer Research Foundation, respectively, explain that “The growing convergence of regional and global interests of the U.S., Japan, and India on issues such as Indian Ocean and the evolving Asian security order is clearly driving the trilateral dialogue.”

On October 14, 2015 the navies of India, the U.S., and Japan embarked on a 5-day naval war-gaming exercise off the coast of the Bay of Bengal. The exercise included naval warships, aircraft carriers and submarines from the three nations, signaling the growing strategic significance each country attaches to the other. According to a Joint Statement, the sea drills during *Exercise Malabar* covered the full spectrum of naval maneuvers including military-to-military coordination and anti-submarine warfare. Initially, beginning in 1992, Malabar was a bilateral naval exercise only between India and the U.S. In later years, it occasionally included other countries such as Japan, Australia, and Singapore. An attempt in 2007 to expand and routinize the exercise to include these countries was given up after a diplomatic demarche from China accusing them of ganging up on China.

On the occasion of this year’s *Exercise Malabar*, Beijing’s response seemed milder. An article in China’s state-run media, *Global Times*, stated “India should be vigilant to any intentions of roping it into an anti-China camp.” Despite Chinese criticism, the underlying importance of this bold step towards permanency of trilateral joint drills is centered on the political purpose of establishing a rule-based Indo-Pacific. India has tried to tread cautiously over the years due to China’s concerns, refraining from antagonizing China by not holding *Exercise Malabar* in the Bay of Bengal. However, this year’s exercise highlights a gradual shedding of India’s inhibitions. Not only was Malabar held in the Bay of Bengal, Japan has also been designated as a permanent member of the exercise, reflecting the growing convergence of security interests among India, the U.S., and Japan against the background of Chinese naval assertiveness in the Indian Ocean, the East China Sea and the South China Sea.

Though some analysts have pointed out that there has been a reduction in the total number of warships included in the exercise, the symbolism of having the *U.S.S. Theodore Roosevelt*, one of the world’s largest aircraft carriers, as well as a U.S. missile cruiser and a nuclear-powered submarine participating in the effort, cannot be minimized.

This year’s Malabar exercise is taking place against the backdrop of another significant development, with India, Japan, and the U.S. deciding to elevate their trilateral dialogue to the foreign ministers’ level. John Kerry, U.S. Secretary of State, hosted the inaugural U.S.-India-Japan Trilateral Ministerial dialogue with Indian External Minister Sushma Swaraj and Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida in New York on the margins of United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) meeting in September 2015. The decision to elevate the trilateral dialogue was taken during the first-ever India-U.S. Strategic and Commercial Dialogue held in Washington during the same month. Clearly, any moves to institutionalize and upgrade the trilateral arrangement will be carefully watched by China for signs that this as an anti-China alliance in the making. This question was indeed raised

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at the press conference but both Mr. Kerry and Ms. Swaraj declared that China did not even figure in their conversation.

The underlying significance of this bold step embracing trilateralism in strategic ties is driven with the purpose of ensuring freedom of navigation and respect for international law in the face of increasing Chinese assertiveness. Multilateral maritime cooperation can only be achieved with leaders’ commitment to work more closely with each other through consultations, dialogue, and joint exercises. The declaration of freedom of navigation and unimpeded lawful commerce in the joint statement also reflects the decision of the three sides to achieve greater collaboration.

Until this year, the India-Japan-U.S. trilateral dialogue was held at a lower level twice a year. The seventh edition of the dialogue was held in June 2015 in Honolulu and reiterated the importance of enhanced strategic consultations to ensure that the emerging Asian economic and political architecture remains open and progressive. The dialogue has also assumed significance against the backdrop of the U.S. rebalance to Asia and India’s Act East Policy as well as Japan’s more activist foreign and security role. The growing convergence of regional and global interests of the U.S., Japan, and India on issues such as Indian Ocean and the evolving Asian security order is clearly driving the trilateral dialogue.

Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) is also becoming prominent in these dialogues. The Asia-Pacific region is prone to natural disasters requiring cooperation on HADR missions. During Typhoon Haiyan in November 2013 as well the tsunami and Fukushima nuclear disaster in March 2011, the armed forces of both the U.S. and Japan jointly played an important role in relief efforts. Similarly, in the aftermath of the Nepal earthquake, India launched Operation Maitri, one of the biggest peacetime relief and rescue operations, with Indian rescue teams closely cooperating with the U.S. disaster response team. Earlier, the Indian and the U.S. armed forces had come together during the December 2004 Asian Tsunami. While previous HADR efforts have occurred bilaterally between India and the U.S., and between the U.S. and Japan, tripartite India-U.S.-Japan HADR cooperation is only nascent. Under the aegis of Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response and Military Medicine Exercise (HADR & MM EX), India, the U.S., and Japan had come together only once with the 10 ASEAN countries and its other dialogue partners in 2013. With the elevation of trilateral dialogue to the ministerial level, it is expected that the level of cooperation on HADR will be substantially enhanced and its scope expanded as the three sides agreed to convene an expert-level group on HADR.

In spite of the focus on several different issues, it must be acknowledged that it is the shifting balance of power in the region that is driving this trilateral dialogue. The U.S. is engaged in trilateral initiatives such as the U.S.-Japan-Australia and the U.S.-Japan-Korea groupings. India is also engaged at the Track II level in a trilateral engagement with the U.S. and Australia, and has been simultaneously strengthening bilateral ties and enhancing interoperability with Singapore, such as in the recent SIMBEX operations in May 2015. India-Australia strategic interactions have also received a boost since Prime Minister Narendra Modi came into office and the two countries recently concluded the AUSINDEX military exercise, a clear indicator of the growing security ties.

Countries such as Australia and Singapore, which have similar concerns and interests on the evolving Asian security dynamics, need to be brought in, as India furthers its maritime outreach. It is important that India shed its inhibitions and fully embrace new minilaterals which will expand the full potential of strategic cooperation between India, the U.S., Japan, and Australia.

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