



The New Trilateral: Enhancing U.S.-Europe-Japan Cooperation to Reinforce the International Institutional Order

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Summary

During his trip to the United States in 2013, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe declared, “Japan is back.” That is good. The ambition now should be to bring Europe back, too, and the US, into their joint work, as a strategically oriented “New Trilateral.” The liberal principles of the United Nations system that have allowed the world to fare so well since the Second World War are today endangered. Countries that have so far contributed to maintaining and developing these principles need therefore to coordinate their opinion- and strategy-building. Such countries include primarily the United States, European Union member states, and Japan. What they should strive to build is a new, efficient trilateral relationship. The major international institutions are key platforms for this undertaking.

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Analysis

An old relationship which lost its luster

Our world is less “orderly” than it seemed to be in the second half of the 20th century. As a consequence, nations are striving to establish new structures of order by creating ever newer international institutions – such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Regional Forum (ARF), the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), or the G20 group of leading developed and emerging economies. There are basically four kinds of such institutions. Some are institutions in name only that do not achieve much in the real world: the East Asia Summit (EAS) for example. There are institutions that are necessary and thrive without causing much friction, such as the World Health Organization (WHO). Other institutions are needed but hard work is involved in achieving some of their objectives, such as the United Nations Climate Change Conference. Lastly there are institutions of like-minded partners who have so much in common that they cooperate routinely and as a matter of course, like the G7 group of advanced democracies.

The trilateral relationship between the United States, Japan, and Europe used to be such a natural like-minded relationship, close but never formalized as an institution. Today it is not what it was during the Cold War. The United States’ broader relationship with Japan, beyond the security alliance, is an outgrowth of its traditional role as guarantor of security in the Far East. Washington therefore matter-of-factly assumes closeness in a relationship with Japan that in reality occasionally gives rise to consternation – on both sides – whether over the US position on Okinawa or over Japan’s “history problem.” Similarly, the US takes its relationship with Europe for granted – even if here reality confirms the assumption of agreement even less than in the case of Japan, as the Iraq war or the ongoing Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) negotiations show.

The European relationship to Japan is almost paradoxical. Recent findings show that both Europe’s political, economic and cultural elites and the wider European public there is broad awareness of the outstanding role Japan plays in the world economy.¹ Europeans broadly view Japan as a country that wields considerable soft power. At the same time, Japan’s role as a contributor to problem-solving globally seems almost irrelevant to Europeans. Similarly, Tokyo’s political relationship with the EU never plays a major role in the public debates in Japan.

In this old trilateral relationship the third side of the triangle is the weak one: the American superpower is more important to both Japan and Europe than they are to each other. But a close trilateral relationship might be even more important today than it was during the Cold War. The problems all three countries face show why cooperation is key.

Those problems caused by Russia under Vladimir Putin, for example, reveal differences between the strategic concepts among European countries, and between the European Union (EU) and the United States, on issues such as whether to supply arms to Ukraine. These disagreements make the development of joint positions difficult if not impossible. At the same time, Europeans and Americans know well enough that without standing together they will not be able to deal with the Putin challenge efficiently. Similarly, conceiving of a strategy that the neighbors of Japan and other East Asian countries might employ to deal with the enormous – positive and negative – changes wrought by the increasing might of China may also create divisions across both the Pacific and the Atlantic, while a sensible China strategy would be more efficient if pursued in unity.

¹ See http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_new_japan_paradox5044.



It is the same story in many areas, be it free trade, international finance, climate change, resources and energy, the global refugee crisis, or terrorism: As long as efficient solutions have not been found, national pressures to act may pit one government against another over the question of the right strategies. But all states threatened by terrorism know that it can only be combatted through joint action. In the emerging global commons that is cyberspace we see similar conflicts. In the different cyberspace issues – including military use of information technology (IT) in space, commercial applications, and cyber criminality use – there is also potential for conflicts over potential and how to prevent or prosecute its misuse. All who stand to benefit from cyberspace’s possibilities should want to coordinate their activities. Yet, individual interests of states, industry, and civil society make this difficult.

The problem of more emerging crises that rip apart the fabric of international order and yet demand stronger cooperation is compounded by the increasing number of international actors, both state and non-state. This makes finding solutions more complicated and potentially conflictual. Solutions can be more successfully implemented if a higher number of states support them. In the case of Afghanistan after the war of 2001 even the United States became aware of this new reality when it had initially tried to shoulder the military aspects of rebuilding Afghanistan with the United Kingdom alone – but soon turned to NATO and others for additional support in the newly created International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) framework. It need not be nation-building of the scale of the effort in Afghanistan, it becomes ever more true generally that states need to cooperate to find solutions – or to impede policies devised by others. The more like-minded countries with similar values cooperate, the more successful will they be.

Mainstays of the liberal international order

The US, the EU, and Japan are cases in point. Besides all being mature democracies, the most central value that these three agree on is the maintenance of the liberal international order. This “order” is at heart a system of rules derived from principles of governance laid down in the Charter of the United Nations and relevant UN documents and resolutions, subscribed to over the decades by UN member states – in effect all countries in the world.

While these principles constitute values that should be shared by all UN member countries, this is of course not always the case, whether in the realm of human rights, peaceful conflict resolution, or respect for the global commons. For example, freedom of navigation and overflight is increasingly restricted.² Throughout the decades since the UN was founded, it was the United States more than other nation that invested in the upkeep of that liberal international order. However, it always needed the cooperation of others. That is even truer today, with the liberal international order under threat from multiple pressures. The conclusion is that states bound by the universal values of the United Nations Charter should cooperate not only in principle or case-by-case. This is especially true for the mainstays of the liberal international order – the United States, Europe, and Japan.

Obviously there are reasons that stand in the way of cooperation and might explain the weakened image of Japan as a political actor in Europe, and of Europe in Japan. Europe may be facing what Osaka University

² We should note that such restrictions in fact are at least partly the consequence of the newly established Law of the Sea Treaty (UNCLOS), in effect since 1994 (with today 166 signatory nations): While in the past every country was entitled to a three-mile territorial zone—increased to 12 miles by many countries after the Second World War—with the Law of the Sea countries that had demanded wider maritime spaces for exploitation (200 mile zones, or a whole continental shelf) were accommodated, leading to more complicated rules on the difference between territorial waters and “Exclusive Economic Zones” that as a result tend to lead to confusion, and conflicts.



professor Kazuya Sakamoto calls an “existential crisis”, fighting centrifugal forces that are the outgrowth of a confluence of challenges: Russia’s new assertiveness, the Euro countries’ different views on economic governance, and the refugee influx. It may therefore be open to doubt whether Europe is capable of shouldering additional responsibilities elsewhere in the world.³

The rise of China has captured everyone’s attention, leaving Japan with a much diminished role in the broader Asia picture, in the perception of elites and the public in European and the United States. And the attention it does get is often focused on its economic troubles. Both Americans and Europeans thus tend to overlook the fact that Japan is the richest, most democratic, and most peaceful country in Asia. Meanwhile, Japanese and Americans often forget that Europeans are important co-providers of global public goods. At the same time, while it remains the sole remaining superpower and the major guarantor of security in Europe and East Asia, the United States has gradually withdrawn from the role of the “indispensable nation,”⁴ much less the “world’s policeman.”⁵

This might be less of a problem if it had resulted in more cooperative efforts by other powers to fill the space left by the United States, the EU, and Japan. This not being the case, the relative weakness of the three is an argument for them to strengthen the bonds that exist – after all, their dependency on the liberal international order is not irrelevant fantasy but something their existence as freely trading nations on the front lines of globalization and technological progress depends on. The question is how to go about strengthening their cooperation in practice. Consultation forums are in place; so are regular summits and consultations of government agencies, parliaments, academic institutions, industry, and civil society. It is a question of the will to make more out of what exists but has lost its luster.

International institutions: platforms of cooperation

It might be useful to look at the institutions that already have well-developed routines of cooperation. The G7, where the EU is at the table too, could be the place to start. Here, discussions among senior civil servants take place on the most urgent problems the group faces, before ministers and the leaders themselves meet. These discussions sometimes go to the deep core of trilateral cooperation.

For example, when Beijing proposed to establish the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), this was discussed within the G7 at Sherpa level with the aim to arrive at a joint position. In the end, differences of opinion between the United States and Japan on one side and Europeans on the other turned out to be unbridgeable, but the effort was still worthwhile. The G7 foreign ministers’ declaration on maritime security,⁶ later endorsed by the group’s heads of state and government, was the result of a discussion of an imminent and serious problem, with freedom of navigation in East and Southeast Asia increasingly appearing to be threatened by China. For some years, while Russia was a member of the group (which had changed its name to the G8), the G7 hoped that leaders in Moscow would subscribe to the values of the liberal international order. In the process, the group lost some of its global luster as Russia worked to make decisions difficult or nearly impossible. Now returned to its like-minded G7 form, the group could not only regain some of its lost influence

³ See how most of all China is viewed today internationally: <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/07/14/chapter-2-chinas-image/>

⁴ See http://fas.org/news/iraq/1998/02/19/98021907_tpo.html

⁵ A widely used and both positively and negatively connoted description of the US’ global role; see for example <http://www.npr.org/2008/02/20/19180589/should-america-be-the-worlds-policeman>

⁶ See http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/DE/Infoservice/Presse/Meldungen/2015/150415_G7_Maritime_Security.html



that once saw it described as an “institutionalized hegemon,”⁷ but might also turn out to be the main arena for cooperation between Japan, the United States, and Europe. It might be worthwhile to invest in the G7’s cohesiveness by setting up regular channels for trilateral communication, building on the sherpas’ networks.

The *United Nations Security Council* is “structurally restrained”⁸ and faces diminishing authority because of its frequent inability to bridge gaps between some Permanent Members. Yet it remains the forum that the world looks to when seemingly unmanageable conflicts break out. Two EU countries, the UK and France, are permanent members, but Japan is not. With Germany, India and Brazil Japan has tried since the mid-1990s to become a permanent member, but all four cases face obstacles. Therefore true trilateral cooperation in the UN will be difficult to achieve in regular diplomatic practice. Efforts can be made, for example on peacekeeping operations. Other United Nations fora such as the Human Rights Council (HRC), the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), or the UN Educational, Social, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) lend themselves also to the objectives of new trilateral cooperation.

There are four more organizations that would become more efficient if trilateral cooperation increased within their respective frameworks. The *G20* deals with international economic governance; the *World Trade Organization (WTO)* works on developing rules for international trade to fight protectionism and to establish freer trade; the *Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)* of 34 democratic and industrialized countries works to promote global economic growth, prosperity, and development. Lastly, *NATO* as a defense alliance has, since the end of the Cold War, evolved into an organization that looks beyond its original regional confines of the North Atlantic. Thus it has led ISAF in Afghanistan, and is engaged in the international anti-piracy effort in the Indian Ocean. It has already commenced dialogues with major partners globally – including Japan⁹ – but to turn Japan into a privileged partner would be a constructive change. This possibility has not yet been explored in depth as Japan did not fulfill the legal requirements, but since new security legislation was enacted in 2015,¹⁰ Japan should be able to take a more active role in conceiving strategies to deal with global security problems in partnership with the alliance.

A strategic trilateral?

The key phrase may be strategic cooperation. “Strategic partnerships” as they abound in today’s world are not much more than simply diplomatic relations.¹¹ China has about 50 so-called “strategic partnerships” with other nations. In point of fact, true strategic cooperation between Japan, Europe, and the United States would mean that each partner provides what the others do not have, offering all three sides a wider array of opportunities. It would mean that the United States, the EU, and Japan would devise strategies together. These could include, for example, how to implement the July 2012 US-EU joint statement on cooperation in Asia; Japan – and perhaps also other democratic countries in the region – should be included in discussions and in decision-making. China’s assertive foreign policy, Russia’ aggressiveness in Europe and the Middle East, the challenge constituted by the Islamic State terrorist group to all the world, the refugee problem – these are topics on

⁷ See Alison Bailin. 2005. *From Traditional To Group Hegemony: The G7, The Liberal Economic Order And The Core-Periphery Gap (G8 and Global Governance)*. Farnham: Ashgate Pub Ltd.

⁸ See Jochen Prantl: *Informal Groups of States and the UN Security Council*. In: *International Organization / Volume 59 / Issue 03 / July 2005*, pp 559-592

⁹ See http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50336.htm.

¹⁰ See http://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page1we_000084.html.

¹¹ “An indication of the true weight given to such relationships is the fact that it seems not possible to even find out how many of them the United States has concluded. A question to the State Department resulted in a reply saying “We encourage you to visit our website at www.state.gov for Secretary Kerry’s speeches and Department publications.”



which not only positions should be compared, resulting in joint declarations, but also for which joint action should be undertaken.

The trilateral relationship does not suffer from a lack of institutions or of urgent tasks. The job will be to employ the existing institutions in a more meaningful way. A forum that seeks to find ways for this to happen already exists. It is the “Trilateral Commission,”¹² created in 1973. As its founding declaration notes:

“Japan, Western Europe, and North America, in view of their great weight in the world economy and their massive relations with one another, bear a special responsibility for developing effective cooperation, both in their own interests and in those of the rest of the world... To be effective in meeting common problems, Japan, Western Europe, and North America will have to consult and cooperate more closely.”

The Trilateral Commission still exists, and has been enlarged on the Japanese side to include representatives of most Asian-Pacific countries, but is a mere shadow of its former influential self. A revitalized commission would be an obvious venue to discuss in concrete terms, and with representatives of government and parliaments involved, how the three allies should frame their work of conceiving global strategies to reinforce and uphold the liberal international order.

The three sides, when devising their policies, need to read from the same page as much as is possible and speak as a single voice. During his trip to the United States in 2013, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe declared, “Japan is back.” That is good. The ambition now should be to bring Europe back, too, and the US, into their joint work, as a strategically oriented “New Trilateral.”

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

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<http://www.gmfus.org/publications/defending-fraying-order>

¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trilateral_Commission. From the founding declaration: “Japan, Western Europe, and North America, in view of their great weight in the world economy and their massive relations with one another, bear a special responsibility for developing effective cooperation, both in their own interests and in those of the rest of the world.” The quote in the above text is also from this declaration.



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