

Emerging Dynamics in the Indo-Pacific: Charting the Course of Indo-US-Japan Trilateral Strategic Convergence

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India's 'Act East' and Indo-Pacific policies have integrated within its domain countries of East Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific region, including Japan and Australia, as well as significant extra-regional powers, like the United States (US) as fellow members of the East Asia Summit. Within this scheme of association, the triangular relationship among India, Japan and the US has emerged as the most spectacular and defining dynamic, akin to the evolution of a concert of "like-minded" partners, tending to be "ambitious together"¹ in providing a cooperative response to the contemporary challenges, in particular, those posed to the rules based liberal world order. This willingness demonstrates the US' strategy of selective engagement with like-minded countries, underscoring the objective of preserving its key alliances and safeguarding its vital strategic interests.² Beyond the immediate ASEAN circuit, India's concerns vis-à-vis China's "expansionist" approach, "encroaching on the land and in the waters of other nations"³ has been successively and periodically voiced, in unison with other stake-holders, both at the bilateral and multilateral pedestals, significant among them being the Indo-Japan-US trilateral. India's concerns regarding the buttressing of Chinese territorial claims by building artificial islands, runways and radar facilities in the South China Sea and related activism pertaining to the militarisation of the South and East China Seas, its recalcitrance vis-à-vis the Permanent Court of Arbitration's ruling on the South China Sea (July 2016), the declaration of an Air-Defence Identification Zone extending towards the Senkaku Islands, etc. have been shared by US and Japan and acknowledged as matters of serious concern, posing a direct challenge to the freedom of navigation and maritime order in the Indo-Pacific. Given this backdrop, Japan's rediscovery of India as a partner armed with the ability and the

responsibility to “nurture and enrich these seas (the Indian and Pacific Oceans) to become seas of clearest transparency” and sharing with it the values and interests of working “to enrich the seas of freedom and prosperity, which will be open and transparent to all”⁴ has evolved as the backbone of Indo-Japan strategic partnership “indispensable” for ensuring peace and prosperity in the interconnected Asia, Pacific and Indian Ocean regions. India’s rationale of greater strategic coordination with Japan almost synchronised with the former US President, Barack Obama’s ‘Pivot to Asia’ policy and subsequently with the US’ pronouncement of *National Security Strategy/NSS* (December 2017) and *National Defense Strategy/NDS* (January 2018) under the tenure of President Donald Trump.

The Trump administration’s use of the “Indo-Pacific” label, not only acknowledges the “importance of India’s rise”, but also the vital role that India envisages to play in the region. Similar to the “Pivot”/rebalancing strategy, it has been hailed as an embodiment of “a real pivot to Asia”,⁵ facilitating and encouraging greater and sustainable coordination among the littoral powers. Furthermore, the US underscores the imperative of strengthening Indo-Pacific alliances through a policy of collective response with partners that uphold a shared respect for sovereign, fair, reciprocal trade practices and rule of law. Therefore, its emphasis on reinforced commitment to freedom of the seas and the peaceful resolution of territorial and maritime disputes in accordance with international law underscores Washington’s stance of safeguarding a Free and Open Indo-Pacific/FOIP.⁶ It is in this context, that the article argues that the accommodation of Japan’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific policy with India’s ‘Act East’ policy and the US’ thrust towards the Indo-Pacific provide the fulcrum of a strengthened trilateral cooperation among India, Japan and US. Given this preliminary backdrop, it provides the common ground of strategic convergence among India, Japan and the US, as well as identifies the shared impulses guiding the same. It also focuses on the Indo-Japan dynamics of strategic cooperation within the wider trilateral framework and identifies the ‘Make in India’ programme as its facilitator.

India, Japan and US: Impulses of Trilateral Convergence

The strategic convergence between India, Japan and US was manifested with the conduct of the maiden Foreign Ministerial level (Trilateral) meeting in September 2015, under the stewardship of the then US President, Barack Obama. This meeting articulated their increasing economic and strategic convergence on safeguarding the freedom of

the Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) as the lifeline of trade and commercial externalities. The Statement issued by the three Foreign Ministries at the conclusion of this meeting underscored “the importance of international law and peaceful settlement of disputes; freedom of navigation and over-flight; and unimpeded lawful commerce, including in the South China Sea”⁷ and demonstrated their common stride against China’s aggressive forays in the regional littorals. Furthermore, the three countries resolved to expand the scope of military exercises and maritime cooperation such that the forces became interoperable. Japan’s induction as a permanent member of the ‘MALABAR’ naval exercise held in October 2015, as per the decision embarked upon in the 2015 Trilateral, was its immediate outcome. This collaboration is in addition to the bilateral ‘JIMEX’ held annually between India and Japan since January 2012.

Following this optimism, the India-Japan-US Summit at the highest level was held in November 2018, which embarked on the idea of building an “open and inclusive” regional architecture in the Indo-Pacific. While this inclusive architecture identified connectivity, sustainable development, maritime security, disaster relief and freedom of navigation as its basic parameters⁸ the proposed outcome was aimed at reinforcing and sustaining the degree of cooperation and convergence of vision among India and its two strategic partners, skillfully and symbolically abbreviated ‘JAI’ (Japan-America-India), towards “realising a free and open Indo-Pacific”.⁹ This merged with India’s Indo-Pacific policy, which is premised on openness; inclusiveness, without intending to single out any country as inimical; and the acknowledgement of ASEAN centrality and unity. India’s Indo-Pacific policy primarily seeks to promote, safeguard and evolve a common rules-based regional order, which “equally apply to all individually as well as to the global commons”, ensuring the prospects of “equal access as a right under international law to the use of common spaces on sea and in the air that would require freedom of navigation, unimpeded commerce and peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with international law.” The policy thus upholds New Delhi’s commitment to multilateralism, regionalism and rule of law, while fostering “common pursuit of progress and prosperity” of all stake-holders.¹⁰ In this context, the trilateral cooperation, based on the shared fundamental values such as freedom, democracy and rule of law has rightly been acknowledged to be “critically important for the stability and prosperity” of the region, particularly for bolstering maritime security and regional connectivity.¹¹

The Bilateral Connection in the Trilateral Chain: Indo-Japan Strategic Cooperation

Having analysed the rationale guiding the trilateral convergence, the succeeding part of the chapter dwells on the bilateral-level association of India with Japan as an essential arm of the Indo-US-Japan triumvirate. Japan's policy of addressing the challenges in the maritime sphere in particular, as unveiled in the *National Security Strategy (NSS)*, 2013 inherently adopted a balancing approach, both internal and external. On the one hand, the Strategy outlined the development of a streamlined planning and programming process, encompassing the *National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG)* and the *Medium Term Defense Program (MTDP)* for bolstering its defence structure as a deterrent (internal balance). On the other hand, as a maritime nation with vital economic, energy and strategic interests in the SLOC stretching from the Persian Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz, the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden to the surrounding waters of Japan, passing through the Indian Ocean, the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea, it sought to play a pivotal role, in conjunction regional littoral powers, by enhancing "frequency and the quality of bilateral and multilateral cooperation on maritime security". Of particular significance for coastal states along the SLOC like India was the NSS' pronouncement of the imperative for assisting in enhancing their maritime law enforcement capabilities and strengthening cooperation with partners "who share strategic interests with Japan".¹² Towards this end, Prime Minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe specifically named Japan's allies and friendly nations, "including every leader of ASEAN member countries as well as the leaders of the United States, Australia, India, the United Kingdom, France and others", while acknowledging their explicit and enthusiastic support for its policy of "Proactive Contribution to Peace", in addition to attesting to his convergence with the US on strengthening trilateral cooperation with like-minded partners for promoting regional peace and economic prosperity.¹³

In this backdrop of emerging conviviality, Narendra Modi welcomed his counterpart, Abe's gesture of cooperation as a complement to the broader trilateral. The Prime Minister of India's enthusiasm to embrace Tokyo was reflected in his selection of Japan as his first port of call outside the immediate neighbourhood after assuming office in May 2014. This was not only concomitant with the strategic underpinnings of the 'Act East' Policy, but also demonstrated "the high priority that Japan receives in our foreign and economic policies" and "Japan's

paramount importance in my vision for development and prosperity in India and in peace, stability and prosperity in Asia at large.”¹⁴ During the first term of the NDA-II administration in India, the Annual Prime Ministerial Summit and the conduct of annual Strategic Dialogue at the Foreign Minister level, Annual Defence Ministerial Dialogue, Defence Policy Dialogue, National Security Advisors’ Dialogue and Staff-level Dialogue of each service, while reaffirming commitment to instituting Foreign Ministerial and Defence Ministerial Dialogue (2+2 format), have provided an architecture for advancing strategic cooperation between the two countries. India and Japan have institutionalised a series of military and defence-related agreements, in an endeavour to “transform the India-Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership, a key relationship with the largest potential for growth, into a deep, broad-based and action-oriented partnership, which reflects a broad convergence of their long-term political, economic and strategic goals”.¹⁵ Among the defence-related agreements, the Agreement concerning the Transfer of the Defence Equipment and Technology, providing a framework to enhance defence and security cooperation by making available to each other, defence equipment and technology necessary to implement joint Research and Development and/or production projects or projects; the Agreement concerning Security Measures for the Protection of Classified Military Information, which obligates both countries to protect classified military information exchanged, thereby facilitating more robust intelligence exchanges between their Forces;¹⁶ and the Implementing Arrangements for Deeper Cooperation between the Navies for facilitating greater cooperation and information exchange in the sphere of Maritime Domain Awareness¹⁷ have been noteworthy. Besides, the convergence on commencing negotiations on an Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA) along the lines of Logistics Exchange and Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) in order to provide the mutual use and access to naval bases for fuel/servicing and initial deliberations on a White Shipping Agreement would be pivotal provide enhanced space and interoperability for their navies. The importance of bilateral ties has been envisioned in the ‘Vision Statement’ released in course of the India-Japan Annual Summit in October 2018, which not only upheld the transformation of relations “into a partnership with great substance and purpose”, put forth as a “corner stone of India’s Act East Policy”, but also underscored the advance into the “new era in India-Japan relations”,¹⁸ so as to further cooperate for ensuring peace, stability, inclusiveness and prosperity of Indo-Pacific region. Thus, Abe’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision, with the policy of Japan’s ‘Proactive Contribution to Peace’ forming its fulcrum, seeks to complement US-

Japan alliance by the forging of security and strategic ties with 'like-minded' democracies like India, which share the liberal values of freedom, democracy and rule of law.

Indo – Japan Collaboration in Defence: 'Make in India' as the Gateway

The Government of India's 'Make in India' initiative, particularly its defence manufacturing component, has opened greater avenues of collaboration between India and Japan with respect to joint development and production of defence equipment. The 'Make in India' programme provides Japan investment opportunities in sectors like defence products manufacturing, supply chain sourcing and defence offsets, legal trade practices in the aerospace and military industries and arrangements in which the seller of a defence product or service agrees to buy products or services from its client as an inducement. New Delhi's decision to allow defence FDI up to 100% with a rider that the project should involve "modern technology" has enthused the Japanese defence industry with respect to its investment prospects, facilitated by Tokyo's relaxation of rules on export of defence equipment and technology introduced in April 2014, which hitherto concentrated exclusively on the domestic market in order to demonstrate its commitment to peace. Japan's Shin Maywa Industries, the manufacturer of US-2i SAR amphibious aircraft, offered to set up a plant in New Delhi (under the 30% offset clause) to cater to international demands. India and Japan have moved closer towards concluding the first-ever bilateral defence deal, following a pricing agreement for the twelve SAR aircrafts. With Japan offering Shin Maywa US-2i amphibious aircrafts at a price concession of more than 10% per aircraft, the deal is in the penultimate stage of finalisation. However, the deal is far from done yet, as the Japanese Ministry of Defence is intent on India establishing its procurement policy at the earliest, succeeding which Japan would flexibly respond to its requests for cooperation.

Over the last few years, several initiatives have been undertaken both by New Delhi and Tokyo to promote greater participation and investment in the defence sector, facilitated by the revisions in the Defence Procurement Procedures (DPP) within the 'Make in India' framework, particularly aided by the introduction of Strategic Partnership Model, increase in FDI through automatic route to 49%; restricting licensing requirements for critical items; de-notifying several items previously produced only by Ordnance Factory Boards; etc. On the other hand, bilateral convergence pertaining to cooperation in the

defence sector has been facilitated by significant transformation instituted by the Abe administration since his assumption of office in 2012. Japan's new security legislations, in consonance with the *NDPG for Financial Year/FY 2014 and Beyond*, offers immense opportunities for realising the optimum level of strategic cooperation with India. While paving the way for complementing each other in the maritime security domain in particular, the Guidelines recognise India's ascendance among the regional players, noting that "Japan will strengthen its relationship with India in a broad range of fields, including maritime security, through joint training and exercises as well as joint implementation of international peace cooperation activities."¹⁹ As the latest *NDPG for FY 2019 and Beyond* recognises China's forceful, large-scale and rapid reclamation of maritime features and their conversion into military facilities in the South China Sea, in addition to its "lack of transparency surrounding its defense policy and military power" to pose a "serious security concern for the region including Japan", it aims to balance the emerging situation by further strengthening cooperation with India and the US.²⁰ Moreover, in addition to India, the strategy aspires to fortify alliance with US by enhancing the domain of cooperation in a wide range of spheres, including implementing measures to facilitate the stationing of US forces on its soil, as an instrument of improving operational readiness and deterrent capabilities, the consolidation of operational cooperation and policy coordination, particularly in comprehensive air and missile defence~ personnel training and exercises; Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance/ISR operations; providing logistic support for US force activities and protection of its ships and aircraft. On the other hand, with the purpose of enhancing strategic partnership with India, Japan aims to promote joint training and exercises as well as collaboration in defence equipment and technology in a broad range of areas including maritime security.²¹

As the present data indicate, based on the adoption of the *NDPG for FY 2019 and Beyond* and a new procurement plan, *MTDP for FY 2019 – FY 2023* (in December 2018) the Diet approved a "record high" defence budget of 5.26 trillion Yen (US\$ 47.2 billion) for FY 2019, that has expanded by almost 12% over seven years, to develop and invest in new capabilities and equipment.²² It marks the seventh consecutive increase in defence budget under the Abe administration, and a year-on-year increase of 1.3%²³ as Tokyo aspires to invest in new capabilities and equipment, prominent among which are the introduction of two US military's 'Aegis' Ashore land-based missile interceptor system, with "offensive" aircraft carrier capabilities, accommodating F-35A and 35B

stealth jets including short take-off and vertical landing versions to help bolster defences along its islands at the edge of the East China Sea, cyber, space and enhanced ISR capabilities. This is part of the Ministry of Defence's plan to spend 27 trillion Yen (US\$ 239.5 billion) on its military over the next five years starting April 2019.²⁴ Additionally, the *MTDP for FY 2019 – FY 2023* endorsed setting aside US\$ 240 billion to pave the way for beefing up weapons and defence equipment.

Therefore, Japan's escalated allocation in the defence budget augurs well for its strategic congruence with India, further facilitated by the policies introduced within the scaffold of 'Make in India' and the amended DPP (2016). It introduced the Indigenously Designed Developed and Manufactured (IDMM) as a category for acquisition, which, along with the 'Buy and Make Indian' categories would assist global Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEM) and Indian companies to forge partnership for co-development and co-production.²⁵ Incidentally, the DPP outlines were in sync with Japan's launching of the guidelines of the Ministry of Defense's Acquisition, Technology and Logistics Agency in October 2015, which proposed the effective management of defence equipment acquisition and promoting defence equipment cooperation with its allies, thereby boosting its involvement in international development programmes. Furthermore, India's latest *Defence Production Policy (2018)* attempts to build on these initiatives and provide a focused, structured and significant thrust to development of indigenous defence design and production capabilities. It ambitiously targets to achieve a turnover of US\$ 26 billion in defence goods and services by 2025²⁶.

It follows from the discussion above, that the concurrence of Indo-Japan-US concerns regarding the security, openness/freedom and accessibility of the Indo-Pacific, demonstrates their spree, bilaterally and trilaterally to deter the enhancing silhouette of China in the region. As the three countries converge on balancing China's hegemonic ambitions, they attempt to uplift the liberal norms of international order, particularly the regional maritime order, while respecting the anchorage provided by ASEAN to the region. Finally, the three countries, whether in bilateral or trilateral collaboration, have clearly sent out the message of pursuing no hegemonic designs. On the contrary, they are committed to advancing a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region, premised on the liberal tenets of respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, rule of law, good governance, free and fair trade and freedom of navigation and over-flight, as a means for securing the trade and energy-related interests of the regional states.

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