

ASSESSING THE TRILATERAL STRATEGIC DIALOGUE

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The Trilateral Strategic Dialogue: Facilitating Community-Building or Revisiting Containment?

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NOTE This *Special Report* originates from two separate research endeavors led by the Australian National University. The first study entails collaborative research on “Regional Perspectives on Global Security” undertaken by institutions of higher education affiliated with the International Alliance of Research Universities (IARU). The second project is sponsored by the Australia-Japan Foundation (AJF) at Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and focuses on emerging Australia-Japan security cooperation. The University of Sydney’s Centre for International Security Studies (CISS) and the Lowy Institute for International Policy were also instrumental in providing support for the workshop. Griffith University’s Centre of Excellence for Policing and Security (CEPS)—and particularly its deputy director, Peter Grabosky—should also be cited.

REPORT SUMMARY

This Special Report weighs the policy implications of the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD) and assesses its efficacy as a component of Asia-Pacific security architecture.

MAIN FINDINGS

- If managed successfully, the TSD can facilitate the integration of bilateral and multilateral models of security politics in the Asia-Pacific. Rigorous coordination of public statements and policy initiatives, however, will shape the degree to which such integration can be realized.
- The so-called quadrilateral initiative, in which India would join the TSD framework, was effectively neutralized, and eventually jettisoned, by domestic political developments in Australia and Japan.
- The 2008 U.S. presidential campaign failed to address the TSD and the U.S. bilateral alliance network, raising some minor apprehensions, particularly in Australia, over the future of U.S. alliance management in the region.
- There is optimism regarding the TSD's ability to avoid China perceiving the arrangement as a containment strategy. In part, however, that outcome is dependent on how China carries out its own regional security behavior in the near to mid-term.
- Given the legacy of successful bilateral Australia-Japan political-security relations, initial strains in Australia-Japan relations shaped both by Japan's perceptions that Australian prime minister Kevin Rudd was too "China-centric" in foreign policy orientation and by lukewarm responses in the region to Rudd's Asia-Pacific Community proposal will be temporary.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- The TSD needs to avoid being seen—both in the allied capitals and in Beijing—as an instrument of containment directed against China.
- The new U.S. administration must place a consistent and concentrated emphasis on the TSD's potential for bridging bilateral and multilateral security politics in the Asia-Pacific.
- The TSD's credibility will hinge largely on its success in defining and implementing nontraditional areas of security collaboration. The decision to initially focus on disaster relief and humanitarian assistance was appropriate. Additional areas of collaboration in both traditional and nontraditional security politics would benefit the TSD.

When Barack Obama assumes the U.S. presidency in January 2009 he will be required to assess the relevance of U.S. security alliances around the world. Nearly six decades have passed since the “San Francisco system” of U.S. bilateral alliances in the Pacific was founded near the outset of the Cold War, and their current viability in a rapidly evolving international security environment has been underassessed. Recent efforts to introduce “minilateral” cooperation into this alliance framework by expanding trilateral security cooperation between Australia, Japan, and the United States—an initiative known as the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD)—are particularly noteworthy in this context and warrant special attention. How this initiative is interpreted both by the United States’ other regional security partners and by potential security rivals in the Asia-Pacific could determine future levels of security cooperation and stability in the Asia-Pacific. This Special Report assesses both the cooperative dimensions and possible competitive elements that the TSD initiative brings into that region.

The lack of debate over the future of the U.S. Pacific alliance network during this presidential election year warranted the convening of an international workshop focusing on the TSD. Over four days in early spring, March 31–April 3, 2008, The National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR) joined with the Australian National University, the Lowy Institute, and several Japanese institutions to assemble a group of internationally renowned scholars to assess the TSD’s meaning for Asia-Pacific security politics. The articles that follow in this report of the group’s proceedings provide findings and policy recommendations regarding the TSD’s future. Although their conclusions vary as to the extent to which the TSD acts as a regional stabilizer, the authors leave no doubt that this initiative is one of the most significant developments to have emerged in the region in terms of future implications for both Australian and Japanese security postures and behavior.

TSD Origins

The Asia-Pacific is the world’s most populous and, arguably, wealthiest region.¹ Despite recent progress toward resolution, the regional flashpoints represented by the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan Strait both persist and are still capable of sparking great-power conflict in Northeast Asia. Southeast Asia remains a potential source of jihadist terrorism and is a critical and vulnerable chokepoint for the transit of global energy supplies. Amid such uncertainty, the traditional, U.S.-led network of bilateral security alliances in the region has endured and has arguably grown stronger since the end of the Cold War. That network, however, is increasingly challenged by indigenously generated alternatives for defining and sustaining regional order. U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates recently acknowledged the need to adapt to and accommodate the extensive structural changes now shaping Asian security politics. He has argued strongly that increased cooperation among U.S. allies and security partners—“more multilateral ties rather than hubs and spokes”—is the best way for the United States to extract maximum benefits from both bilateral and multilateral forms of security cooperation. In this context, Gates concluded, the TSD involving the United States, Japan, and Australia exemplifies effective regional security collaboration.²

¹ The Asia-Pacific contains half of the world’s population, with approximately 2.4 billion people living in China and India combined. In early 2008 the region’s economies were estimated to constitute approximately 37% of global wealth. See Jean-Claude Trichet, “The Growing Importance of the Asia-Pacific Region” (speech given at the New Year’s Reception Asia-Pacific 2008 of the German-Asian Business Circle, Frankfurt am Main, February 25, 2008), <http://www.ecb.eu/press/key/date/2008/html/sp080225.en.html>.

² “Speech by Defense Secretary Gates in Jakarta, Indonesia Discusses a Range of Security Issues on East Asia,” February 25, 2008, America.gov website, <http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2008/February/20080225130031eaifas0.2525141.html>.

The TSD was originally convened at the sub-cabinet level in mid-2002. It was upgraded to the current status of a “strategic dialogue” in May 2005 when U.S. secretary of state Condoleezza Rice, following meetings in Washington with Japanese foreign minister Nobutaka Machimura and his Australian counterpart Alexander Downer, announced that the process would be conducted largely at the full ministerial level.³ A major rationale for supplementing the separate U.S. bilateral alliances with Japan and Australia was to strengthen what Australian diplomats characterized as an underdeveloped or “weak third leg” of Australia-Japan security relations. Further, the Bush administration expected regional allies to do more to facilitate evolving U.S. global strategy to fight a war on terrorism, check nuclear proliferation by so-called rogue states, and sustain an acceptable international balance of power against aspiring hegemonic competitors. Creating a stronger Australia-Japan security dyad complied with these expectations. The U.S. Defense Department’s 2006 *Quadrennial Defense Review* stated:

In the Pacific, alliances with Japan, Australia, Korea and others promote bilateral and multi-lateral engagement in the region and cooperative actions to address common security threats...Close cooperation with these partners in the long war on terrorism, as well as in efforts to counter WMD proliferation and other non-traditional threats, ensures the continuing need for these alliances and for improving their capabilities.⁴

In return for more extensive and coordinated Australian and Japanese contributions to U.S. global strategy, policy planners in both Tokyo and Canberra anticipate tangible benefits. These include continued U.S. strategic involvement and the maintenance of strategic guarantees in their regions, reliable access to U.S. intelligence and defense technology, and Washington’s lead in underwriting the defense normalization of Japan in ways that would benefit allied and regional collective security without unduly alarming China and other regional actors. Integrating Japan’s Self-Defense Force into so-called nontraditional security operations such as disaster relief and counterterrorism missions has been a relatively uncontroversial core pursuit of the TSD. Other activities and positions—joint discussions on China’s military transparency, statements regarding the Iranian nuclear issue, postwar reconstruction in Iraq involving Australian and Japanese forces, and possible future roles for Japan in maritime patrolling or peacekeeping operations in combat areas (such as Afghanistan)—have been more controversial. Although conducted outside TSD auspices, continuing Japanese and Australian collaboration with U.S. missile defense research has been regularly criticized by Beijing.⁵

Most of the criticism directed toward the TSD has focused both on its potential to become an instrument of regional containment against China’s rising power and on the potential of that strategy to generate a new Cold War atmosphere in Asia. Southeast Asian countries are

³ “Japan, U.S., Australia to Hold High-Level Strategic Talks in Tokyo,” *Asian Political News*, October 24, 2005, available at http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0WDQ/is_/ai_n15738180. For extensive background on the policy factors and implications of the formation of the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD), see William T. Tow, Mark J. Thomson, Yoshinobu Yamamoto, and Satu Limaye, eds., *Asia-Pacific Security: Australia, Japan and the United States* (London: Routledge, 2007).

⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, *U.S. Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington, D.C., February 6, 2006), 88.

⁵ Although not usually grouping the three Pacific allies together explicitly, Beijing clearly has the TSD powers in its sights when China issues one of its frequent statements condemning missile defense research and development. A late February 2008 statement issued by China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs typifies Beijing’s position on the issue: “China believes that a missile defense (MD) system could not resolve a country’s security concern. On the contrary, the deployment of MD systems is detrimental to global strategic balance and stability, undermines mutual trusts among countries and affects regional and international security. It might also result in the proliferation of missile technologies and bring about an arms race. China hopes countries concerned should act prudently on this issue.” See “Missile Defense,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, February 29, 2008, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjbj/zjzg/jks/kjlc/wkdd/t410755.htm>.

comfortable and preoccupied with building a regional security community and with the ASEAN Regional Forum's objectives of greater confidence-building and preventive diplomacy—objectives that need China's neutrality or support to succeed. These states are thus wary of any initiative that may appear to target China as a destabilizing force in the region.

To Contain (or Not)

Just prior to the inaugural TSD ministerial level meeting in Sydney in March 2006, speculation by Secretary Rice that China could become a negative force in the region intensified regional suspicions about the actual purpose of the TSD. (Secretary Rice subsequently softened her rhetoric—probably as a result of Australian diplomatic pressure—to conform with the meeting's joint communiqué observation that “welcome[d] China's constructive engagement in the region.”)⁶ Subsequent initiatives spearheaded by U.S. vice president Dick Cheney and other conservatives in the Bush administration to draw India into the TSD framework through joint naval exercises similarly aroused suspicion about the TSD. Australia and Japan, meanwhile, had issued a high profile Joint Security Declaration (the prime ministers of both countries signed the document) in March 2007. From early 2006 onward, as the momentum for a containment approach seemed to be crescendoing, perceptions in Beijing that the TSD was transforming into a “little NATO” in Asia intensified.⁷

Speculation about the TSD and a “containment revisited” posture diminished, however, during the second half of 2007 as domestic political forces in the TSD countries and in India worked against the adoption of such a strategy. Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe, who had instigated the unprecedented growth of Japanese-Indian bilateral political-security relations, was forced to resign due to ill health immediately after the September 2007 APEC Leaders Meeting convened in Sydney. His conservative Australian counterpart, John Howard, was defeated in a national election by the Australian Labor Party, led by Sinophile Kevin Rudd. Cheney and other U.S. neoconservatives were facing a decline in their political influence as the Iraq War became increasingly protracted. As ratification of the U.S.-India Nuclear Cooperation Promotion Act became entangled in both countries' legislatures, the Singh government in India shifted toward a more traditional Indian foreign policy posture of non-alignment. By the end of June 2008, the quadrilateral dimension of the TSD appeared to have lost momentum. The TSD has gravitated increasingly toward focusing on nontraditional security areas such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, Pacific island development issues, climate change, and common approaches to counterterrorism. Nuclear nonproliferation on the Korean Peninsula remains a TSD concern, but the extent to which concrete policy coordination on that issue occurs in a trilateral context is limited.⁸

⁶ “Trilateral Strategic Dialogue Joint Statement Australia-Japan-United States,” the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, Press Release, March 18, 2006, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/australia/joint0603-2.html>.

⁷ Purnendra Jain, “A ‘Little NATO’ Against China,” *Asian Times Online*, March 18, 2006, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/HC18Ad01.html>.

⁸ For background on the TSD's evolution through 2006–07, see William T. Tow, “Tangled Webs: Security Architectures in Asia,” Australian Strategic Policy Institute, ASPI Strategy Paper, July 2008, 18–24; “The Second Press Conference, 27th June 2008,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, Press Release, June 27, 2008, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/press/2008/6/0627-2.html>; and Stephen Smith, “Trilateral Strategic Dialogue: Joint Statement,” Office of the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Press Release, June 27, 2008, <http://www.foreignminister.gov.au/releases/2008/fa-s080627.html>.