



Asia Pacific
Pathways to Progress
Foundation, Inc.

Prospects for Trilateral Cooperation: The Philippines, Australia, and Japan

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Executive Summary

The fragmentation of the regional multilateral architecture is currently unfolding. The instability is driven by the evolving behaviors of two great powers: China's increasing assertiveness and the unpredictability of the United States' (U.S.) engagement in the international system. Against this backdrop of geopolitical and geostrategic shifts, this paper advances the prospects of forming a trilateral cooperation between the Philippines, Australia, and Japan. It argues that the trilateral arrangement will facilitate an "intra-spoke cooperation" that will allow the three U.S. allies to pursue proactive roles in buttressing the regional multilateral scaffolding. Using the convergent security approach, it demonstrates how the three spokes can merge their existing bilateral cooperation into a trilateral linkage underpinned by their mutual interests: engaging China constructively, maintaining active U.S. engagement, and promoting an inclusive regional multilateral order.

This paper aims to make two significant contributions. First, it illustrates how to transform the spokes' asymmetrical roles by harnessing their collective strength and emphasizing greater diplomatic and policy autonomy without undermining the centrality of the hub. Second, it advances the pragmatic realization of this proposed trilateral arrangement based on empirical evidence. It concludes that the merging of existing bilateral relationships into a more comprehensive trilateral cooperation will allow the spokes to conduct order-building initiatives. This will preserve and maintain the role of the regional multilateral framework as the neutral ground for dialogue and cooperation amid the ongoing great power contest.

To demonstrate the viability of the proposed trilateral linkage, the paper outlines key areas of policy collaboration within the context of reinforcing regional order-building initiatives.

Key Recommendations:

Maritime security cooperation

- Capitalize on Japan's leadership in the area of the defense industry and technology transfer to boost intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capability in the maritime domain. The deployment of naval assets for intelligence-gathering will provide the trilateral cooperation more pro-active coordination among its Navy and Coast guard through real-time information sharing.
- Explore the possible creation of the Philippines-Australia-Japan joint venture to secure a maritime strategic asset located in Subic Bay, Philippines to mitigate potential Chinese takeover. Such venture perfectly complements the major goal of the Philippine Navy and Coastguard of securing the shipyard to maintain their naval assets and build their indigenous naval capabilities.

Humanitarian and Disaster Relief

- Incorporate Humanitarian and disaster relief into the proposed cooperation by incorporating air combat to large force employment training to increase readiness in times of environmental crisis.
- Concentrate on promoting civilian capabilities through various trainings and seminars involving private companies and not-for-profit groups to meet the urgency of providing disaster relief.

Counterterrorism and violent extremism

- Leverage on Japanese capabilities in infrastructure development to rehabilitate post-conflict areas like Marawi city. Engage Australian counterparts to share tactical methods in improving urban military warfare and civil-military relations, as well as countering terrorist groups' propaganda machinery.
- Tighten the tri-border corridor that involves the overlapping parts of the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia to prevent or limit the movement of foreign fighters and possible ISIS recruits in Southeast Asia.
- Increase cooperation in curbing the illicit transfer of financial support in the form of money laundering and other illegal or fraudulent means.

Cybersecurity

- Establish a joint cybersecurity threat intelligence framework that involves key government agencies, military units, and the national Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT) for effective exchange of information regarding the nature, techniques, procedures and methods used by state-sponsored or non-state hackers.

- Invest in research and development as well as workforce training to engender knowledge- and talent-exchange among leading universities, think tanks, private companies, and civil society organizations. Through partnership building, the trilateral cooperation can promote far more flexibility and creativity that can impact other aspects of cybersecurity from data privacy and protection to the advent of artificial intelligence, machine learning, robotics, and quantum technology.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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The views expressed in this working paper are the author's alone and do not necessarily constitute the position of APPFI.

Introduction

If there was any milestone that the highly anticipated G20 Summit in Japan in June 2019 has achieved, it was the resumption of the trade talks between the United States (U.S.) and China. Despite the willingness to open a new round of negotiations, however, regional stability and security in the region remains highly uncertain as the chances of defusing tensions amid the escalating trade war are still very low.¹ This is evident from the inability of the two parties to strike a comprehensive deal, particularly from the view of the United States as President Donald Trump gears up for another presidential race in 2020.²

In the last three years, American foreign policy under Trump has been polarizing. It has espoused an inward-looking posture by emphasizing equal burden-sharing among its allies and partners, as well as receding from multilateral agreements such as the Transpacific Partnership and the Paris Climate Change Agreement.³ It has primarily engaged in international politics based on a transactional view, which at times was designed to satisfy the optics of domestic and international audiences. Despite the unprecedented Trump-Kim summit, the negotiation failed to achieve any significant breakthrough regarding the complete and verifiable denuclearization of North Korea.⁴ Meanwhile, the Middle East is on the brink of open conflict due to rising tensions with Iran following Trump's withdrawal from the nuclear trade deal.⁵ These developments have far-reaching implications to American leadership in the region that has underpinned regional stability, security, and prosperity since the post-World War II era.

To its credit, the Trump administration has launched the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy and subsequently signed the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA) in 2018.⁶ Both policies were reassuring but lacked coherence and substantive strategic imperative in terms of concrete operationalization and clarity to cement America's sustained engagement in the evolving Indo-Pacific landscape.⁷ They exemplify the deep concerns regarding Trump's top-down transactional view of international politics as it fails to integrate various considerations among U.S. allies and its partners in the long-term policy and strategic planning, coordination, and implementation. Thus, the Trump administration's unpredictability and fragmented commitment in the Indo-Pacific poses a significant challenge, especially among its key allies and partners that are now confronted with a far more aggressive China determined to undercut the rules-based liberal order.

In recent years, China continues to aggravate regional stability through its projection of unilateral control in the South China Sea by deploying gray zone tactics in the form maritime militias.⁸ After establishing a near-permanent foothold in the contested waters with reclaimed islands installed with advanced weapon systems, China conducted its first missile testing in the contested waters which further raised tensions in the region.⁹

As the Sino-American tit-for-tat tariffs continue to reach new heights marked by protracted charges and counter-charges, such as the possible ban of Chinese exports of rare earth minerals to the U.S. or denying Chinese access to key U.S. technologies, one thing remains certain: the two largest economies are “decoupling”, or reducing economic interdependence.¹⁰ The possible fragmentation of the global supply chain is underway with various foreign companies pulling out their investments away from the mainland toward developing economies in Southeast Asia.¹¹ Meanwhile, China is now attempting to move from foreign acquisition to import substitution to produce its indigenous technologies.¹²

Against the backdrop of an unpredictable U.S. commitment, an increasingly assertive China, and further exacerbated by their ongoing geopolitical and geo-economic competition is the regional multilateral framework draped in looming uncertainty. At the crossroads of such evolving instability are the Philippines, Australia, and Japan who share not only the strategic imperative of maintaining the regional balance of power, but also the sustainability of the multilateral institutions, norms, and values that underpin the rules-based international order.

This article advances the argument that the existing scope and breadth of the bilateral linkages between the Philippines, Australia, and Japan can be further developed into a trilateral cooperation to buttress the regional multilateral order. Rather than viewing the arrangement as threat-centric, the increased intra-cooperation among the “three spokes” will be instrumental in reinvigorating their roles within the U.S. alliance system to engage in regional order-building initiatives. The implementation of this trilateral linkage can be achieved through the convergent security approach where the “spokes” merge their existing bilateral arrangements grounded on “mutuality” or shared interests.¹³ This will bolster the spokes’ greater diplomatic autonomy to facilitate a more inclusive regional multilateral architecture without compromising their bilateral relationship with the U.S.¹⁴ By enhancing their roles, they pursue a more proactive stance that can reinforce regional stability and prosperity that will continue to engage China and maintain active U.S. commitment in the region.

This paper is divided into four parts. After tracing the fundamental precepts of the study, the proceeding section provides a conceptual overview on trilateral cooperation as a form of minilateralism that is achieved through the convergent security approach. The third section examines the mutual interests of the three spokes to maintain U.S. presence, engage China, and buttress an inclusive regional multilateral architecture. The fourth section probes current areas of bilateral cooperation that offer empirical evidence as initial pathways for trilateral cooperation. It pays particular attention to traditional and non-traditional areas of security cooperation. The final section concludes that forming trilateral cooperation presents the three countries the opportunity to transform their existing roles in the U.S. “hub and spokes” system to undertake more proactive roles in regional institutional building. To prove its viability, the concluding part offers key

recommendations on potential areas of collaboration within the trilateral cooperation that will underpin its order-building initiatives.

Trilateral Cooperation as Minilateral Arrangement and the Convergent Security Approach

To understand trilateral cooperation, this section sheds light on its relationship with a broader concept called minilateralism. From there, it discusses how the proposed trilateral linkage can be implemented using the convergent security approach. Over the past decade, minilateralism has gained traction in the Asia-Pacific given its effectivity and efficiency to achieve greater policy consensus and coordination.¹⁵ Contrary to the trappings of multilateralism, which is characterized by formal treaty agreements and unencumbered multiple decision-makers, minilateralism is far more flexible.¹⁶ It is an ad-hoc type of setup comprised of three to four members working towards mutual interests within a specific timeframe.¹⁷ As a targeted approach, it is capable of mitigating differences among numerous states that can impede progress by enjoining only a limited number of relevant parties to guarantee greater impact in solving specific issues at hand.¹⁸

Trilateralism sits comfortably between bilateral and multilateral arrangements. Bilateralism is exclusive between two states often bound by a formal treaty or an informal agreement to pursue mutual security interests, whereas a trilateral grouping is the most minimal type of multilateralism.¹⁹ Meanwhile, quadrilateralism involves like-minded states bound by democratic values that aim to balance against a potential adversary or cooperate on military and non-military areas of cooperation.²⁰ Compared to a larger membership like a quadrilateral arrangement, a trilateral cooperation presents the ideal number by getting the “balance right” and acts beyond a collective security arrangement.²¹ It mitigates the dominance of a hostile hegemon while carving the path towards a stable regional-order building process.²² The proliferation of bilateralism, trilateralism, and quadrilateral groupings reflects the value of informality that is prevalent in managing Asian security politics and also symptomatic of the ongoing multilateral institution-building that is yet to be achieved.²³

Critics of minilateralism posit that it does not promote inclusiveness as it precludes other states from participating.²⁴ It also has very narrow or limited impact and raises the question of its sustainability.²⁵ Others assume that minilateral security arrangements are another form of enmeshing China using the American-led regional security alliance.²⁶ However, this paper argues that adopting such limited view towards minilateralism, particularly through the prism of merely containing China, undermines the comprehensive collaboration that the network of U.S. allies had established since the end of the Cold war. Such perceptions of containment or balancing strategy perpetuate a zero-sum game narrative that disregards the contributions primarily of the Philippines, Australia, and Japan in the broader aspect of order-building. Thus, a task-oriented

minilateral grouping that involves middle power states presents a rather less threatening case of containment strategy but lends itself towards buttressing regional stability and prosperity.

Trilateral cooperation emerged as a viable form of minilateralism that has strengthened interdependence based on shared values and mutual trust in working towards a number of strategic interests.²⁷ In the aftermath of the Cold War, trilateral groupings like the Trilateral Security Dialogue (TSD) has permitted the U.S., Australia, and Japan to adopt a soft-balancing and cooperative security strategy towards China that eventually paved the way for genuine regional cooperation.²⁸ At the crux of forming a trilateral cooperation was the aim of Washington to refashion the asymmetrical roles of its allies in face of an evolving multipolar regional landscape.²⁹ Under Obama's rebalancing strategy in the Asia-Pacific, it also became a fundamental imperative to reconstitute the roles of the "spokes", or U.S. bilateral allies, to enhance their capacity in responding not only to traditional threats of nuclear proliferation or maritime cooperation, but also to emerging dangers in the realm of cybersecurity and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.³⁰

Moreover, the trilateral forum also worked in parallel with existing regional initiatives like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) to support confidence-building measures and preventive diplomacy.³¹ The capacity-building initiatives initiated by the "spokes," thus present a strong case for further order-building process in the Asia-Pacific.³² Thus, these developments shift the perception of trilateral cooperation from a threat-centric view into a more proactive and cooperative avenue geared towards institutional-building that complements or reinforces regional multilateralism.³³

While the TSD exemplifies a strong evidence to the viability of trilateralism, this paper asserts that the political and economic context of its formation was marked at a time of high-level U.S. engagement. Given the ongoing impasse in U.S. commitment in the region under Trump, the adoption of the "convergent security approach" presents a realistic pathway to the formation of the trilateral grouping. A convergent security approach advances a more "intra-spoke" cooperation where the diplomatic autonomy of the "spokes" is emphasized without undermining the role of the hub.³⁴ It exemplifies all the elements of trilateralism: the merger of existing bilateral alliances into an ad-hoc type of grouping to collaborate on specific policy objectives and to support the agenda of regional multilateral organizations. However, it pushes the envelope further by advancing a cooperative arrangement that situates the role of the "spokes" front and center.³⁵

From the viewpoint of convergent security, the bedrock of forming the spokes-led trilateral arrangement lies on the condition of "mutuality" to achieve "more contemporary, symmetrical relationships [that reflect] cross-cutting interests" in an evolving geopolitical environment. Thus, mutuality must be satisfied to achieve a policy equilibrium where the security relationship of the powerful and less powerful allies "have

matured from distinctly asymmetrical to more evenly balanced sets of interests and interactions.”³⁶ The “spokes” adopt a linear and independent relationship through their own grouping beyond the purview of traditional U.S.-led alliance management but still maintain their bilateral relationships with Washington. They effectively transform their role as spokes to become increasingly agile and more egalitarian to coordinate policies on niche areas of cooperation, thus paving the way to achieving a more open and inclusive regional architecture.³⁷

Through the convergent security approach, the “spokes” can achieve “intra-spoke” cooperation to achieve greater policy consensus. It provides an alternative vision that breaks the conventional hub-and-spokes view where the U.S. has enjoyed a central role. This is even more relevant today as Washington continues to illustrate a mercurial attitude towards the “spokes” in the region. They can now assume even proactive roles by leveraging on their unique capabilities to preserve the regional multilateral framework

Impetus for Trilateral Cooperation: Mutual Interests

The prospects of further developing the scope and breadth of existing bilateral cooperation among the Philippines, Australia, and Japan into a trilateral linkage is highly feasible. Using the convergent security approach, this section elaborates on the three factors that underpin the condition of mutuality in forming the trilateral cooperation: engaging China constructively, maintaining U.S. commitment, and promoting an inclusive regional multilateral architecture. The confluence of these factors based on mutual interests and interactions will impact the pathway of the trilateral arrangement from ideation to fruition and ultimately shape the contours of its engagement in the region.

Engaging China Constructively

Japan and the Philippines share deep concerns over the rise of China and the threat it poses in the status quo. Such mutual interest lies in both countries’ respective territorial disputes with Beijing in the East China Sea and the South China Sea, respectively.³⁸ Their proximity to the mainland brought the two archipelagic states to work closer especially with China’s expansive reclamation and militarization of its artificial islands.³⁹ In 2016, both countries entered into a new defense agreement under their strategic partnership that facilitated technology transfers and capacity-building and interoperability in the area of maritime security.⁴⁰

However, there is more nuance to Japan’s and the Philippines’ strategy toward China. Rather than relying on pure balancing, both countries are hedging against China.⁴¹ For instance, the Philippines under Rodrigo Duterte has built warmer ties with Beijing economically and diplomatically by downplaying its victory at the Permanent Court of

Arbitration in 2016.⁴² The Philippines has also welcomed China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), while Japan expressed its willingness to engage China's BRI through its Asian Development Bank.⁴³ At the same time, both countries have bolstered their defense ties with the U.S. by embracing its Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy.⁴⁴

In contrast, while Australia is not embroiled in any territorial disputes with China, it is deeply alarmed with Beijing's unilateral actions in the resource-stretch waters.⁴⁵ It also views China from a geo-economic standpoint. Australia may not be a party to the BRI but its economy is highly intertwined with China.⁴⁶ Australia's balancing act between China and the U.S. is exemplified by its neat characterization of the two superpowers: the former as the economic partner, the latter as its security guarantor.⁴⁷ Similar to the Philippines and Japan, it supports the U.S.' Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy and continues to participate in the Trilateral Security Dialogue with Japan and the U.S.⁴⁸

It is evident that the perception towards China varies among the three spokes, even though the geopolitical ramifications of China's transgression of the rules-based order based on its rapid militarization of the South China Sea is a collective strategic concern. Despite Beijing's policy pronouncements of preserving stability in the region, its concrete actions in the contested waters contradict its genuine intentions.⁴⁹ Therefore, it is in the mutual interest of the spokes to promote a stable regional order that will encourage Beijing to exercise restraint and act as a responsible and cooperative regional power.⁵⁰ It will be counterproductive for the trilateral cooperation not to consider China's potential and its possible engagement in regional order building. Thus, conceiving the trilateral cooperation will provide a parallel support to multilateral diplomacy in the creation of a common ground for norms, values, and the rule of law. This will enmesh China to continue its constructive dialogue in the region, while mitigating the escalation of tension in the South China Sea that may lead to an outright confrontation.

Maintaining Active U.S. Engagement

The U.S. remains a key plank across the spokes' security and defense policies. However, the credibility of the U.S. under the Trump administration is beset with uncertainty. Trump's unequivocal demand for equal burden-sharing in the provision of international public goods, such as investments in global security, puts an immense pressure among U.S. allies to do more by upgrading their defense spending within the alliance relations.⁵¹ Trump's withdrawal from the Transpacific Partnership and from the Iran Nuclear Deal are ominous signs that threaten the continuing commitment of the U.S. in regional-order building. A recent study conducted by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, reveals that majority in Southeast Asians are skeptical towards the Trump administration's capacity to continue America's role as the primary security guarantor.⁵² Furthermore, as the U.S. government casts China as a strategic competitor, Asian allies can also be forced to eventually choose between the two superpowers.⁵³ This zero-sum

game approach can undermine the autonomy of U.S. allies in the region with respect to their economic and diplomatic dealings with China.

The enhancement of security cooperation among the spokes will facilitate the continuing commitment of the U.S. in the region, while extenuating its unilateral tendencies especially under the Trump administration. The cross-cutting interactions among the spokes from their trilateral cooperation can reinforce their bilateral links with the U.S. and altogether deepen the forward deployment of U.S. presence as a stabilizing force to China's increasing assertiveness in the region. Intra-spoke cooperation can likewise serve as a regional order-building initiative that can reinforce or fill in the absence of U.S. participation in certain issue-areas in the region.

Contrary to the conventional U.S. foreign policy that supports multilateral diplomacy, the Trump administration has resorted to unilateral approaches to resolving key issues that affect the region with little consideration of the implications to its allies. Thus, trilateral cooperation can also address the long-held vision of easing the asymmetrical differences between the U.S. and its allies.⁵⁴ From the view of Manila, Canberra, and Tokyo, the overarching agenda is to convert their respective bilateral alliances to support a regional security architecture that will enmesh the U.S. and temper its unilateral tendencies.⁵⁵ This will mitigate the disproportionate dominance of the U.S. towards its bilateral politics by leveraging on the collective agency of the Philippines, Japan, and Australia in shaping the tendency of American unilateralism in the region.

Promoting an Inclusive Regional Multilateral Architecture

The urgency of forming a trilateral cooperation is warranted now more than ever. The heightened competition between the U.S. and China along with their ever-changing foreign policies make it more crucial to reconfigure new approaches in supporting the regional multilateral order. Thus, the trilateral linkage between the Philippines, Australia, and Japan can reinvigorate the multilateral framework as a neutral diplomatic space to engage the two superpowers and persuade them to arrive at a favorable compromise for the greater good of the entire region.

As China continues to alter the status quo through its de facto control in the South China Sea, and the U.S. credibility under the Trump administration heads towards a sharp decline, it becomes imperative for the Philippines, Australia, and Japan to cooperate closely to strengthen the regional multilateral architecture. This will prevent the great-power tensions from becoming systemically adversarial in nature, which will inflict irreparable damage to the stability and prosperity of regional and international system.

However, the existing bulwark of regional multilateral architecture is also under intense pressure. ASEAN's inability to provide concrete and satisfactory response to regional issues, such as the South China Sea disputes and the Rohingya crisis had exposed

the organization's growing limitations to address emerging concerns in the region.⁵⁶ Despite the broad vision of forging an ASEAN Community, it lacks the organizational capabilities and resources to achieve such commitment. The survival of ASEAN-led regional multilateralism will depend on the organization's capacity to conduct a deep soul-searching of its internal and external outlook in the context of a multipolar world order.⁵⁷ Internally, it must be flexible to adapt informal or minilateral coalitions that will work on specific issues.⁵⁸ Externally, ASEAN must forge greater cooperation with its external dialogue partners that are grappling with similar transnational issues.⁵⁹ These types of arrangements will augment the organization's lack of resources while maintaining its role as the fulcrum of regional order amidst great power rivalry.

Thus, the formation of the trilateral cooperation can buttress ASEAN's continuing relevance. In particular, the order-building initiatives that can be implemented by the Philippines, Australia, and Japan can augment ASEAN's weakening capacity on fundamental issue areas. By working in parallel on key agendas of the regional organization, the trilateral cooperation can maintain ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) as the centerpiece for dialogue and cooperation to avoid miscalculations in the current geostrategic shift. Thus, it is a fundamental interest of the trilateral linkage to reinforce an inclusive regional security scaffolding that will breed greater diplomatic space.

In sum, the confluence of these mutual interests—engaging China constructively, deepening U.S. commitment, and promoting an inclusive regional security architecture—sets the stage for the Philippines, Australia, and Japan to form a trilateral cooperation. The time and circumstances are ripe for an innovative approach to expand geostrategic and geo-economic cooperation beyond the existing bilateral relationships that supports regional institution building.

Foundations of Trilateral Cooperation

To galvanize the trilateral cooperation from idea to implementation, it is critical to revisit the respective bilateral engagements among the Philippines, Australia, and Japan as the primary mechanisms upon which the grouping can further prosper. By recognizing that the U.S. may no longer fully engage or dominate their respective bilateral security politics, the trilateral cooperation will be able to collaborate on a number of political, economic, and security initiatives that will support the broader regional multilateral agenda. The Philippines and Japan are bound by a strategic partnership, Japan and Australia share a special strategic partnership, while the Philippines and Australia maintain their relationship at the comprehensive level. Through their long-standing shared values and mutual interests, the Philippines, Australia, and Japan can merge their existing bilateral partnerships into a trilateral cooperation by focusing on key policy initiatives. This section highlights the existing complementarities and the capability gaps

in the respective bilateral setting of each country as foundational elements for the trilateral arrangement.

According to the Lowy Institute's Asia Power Index 2019, Japan is considered the new leader of the liberal order in Asia.⁶⁰ As the U.S. and China vie for dominance, Japan reigns within a distinct tier where it is positively shaping the region as a "quintessential smart power".⁶¹ Despite its limited resources and capabilities, Japan has been strategically leveraging its defense, diplomatic, economic, and cultural influence in "setting regional standards and maintaining an inclusive multilateral architecture."⁶² In the face of a mercurial Trump, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has managed to resuscitate the U.S.-led Transpacific Partnership in the current form of the CPTPP.⁶³ Japan also has its own infrastructure funding actively present in Southeast Asia. In fact, Japan's infrastructure investments in the region has been called a silent version of China's BRI with its low-key yet effective performance characterized by transparency and inclusivity of local perspectives from its host countries.⁶⁴

The Philippines is one of Japan's leading partners in infrastructure and economic investments.⁶⁵ In 2018, Japan was the Philippines' largest source of overseas development assistance (ODA), accounting for 41.2% of the country's overall loans and grants.⁶⁶ The two countries have established a Joint Committee on Infrastructure Development and Economic Cooperation. The said committee laid down a five-year plan that will coordinate the implementation of public and private-sector investment for various projects from subways, railways, and assistance to the Philippines' peace process in Mindanao.⁶⁷ The Philippines and Japan continue to have a productive strategic partnership under the current leadership of President Duterte and Prime Minister Abe. Amid Duterte's perceived contempt of the U.S. and personal bias toward China, Japan continues to be an important economic and strategic partner.⁶⁸ The Philippines' maritime capability upgrade is also highly credited to Japan's transfer of technology and equipment under their "special" partnership. Under the 2015 defense cooperation memorandum, the two countries continue to deepen their high-level exchanges through regular visits among their armed forces and security officials.⁶⁹ In 2019, Japan and the Philippines were to meet again for the 6th Philippines-Japan Vice-Ministers' Defense Dialogue.⁷⁰

Japan's relationship with Australia is also heading towards an upward trend. In their 8th 2+2 foreign and defense ministerial conference, Australia and Japan reiterated their commitment to further deepen their special strategic partnership and enhance free trade and the rules-based international order.⁷¹ The two countries have also been close partners in naval defense cooperation under their Memorandum of Defense Cooperation signed in 2008.⁷² This presented an opportunity for the two U.S. allies to explore any crossover within Australia's Indo-Pacific Endeavour task force, and Japan's Anti-Submarine warfare drill.⁷³ Under the Australia-Japan cooperation, two sub-regions were identified as crucial umbrella of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Southeast Asia and the South Pacific or the Pacific Island Countries.⁷⁴ In close coordination with ASEAN-led efforts, Japan and Australia are working in parallel with the Philippines, Indonesia, and

Malaysia to provide capacity-building mechanisms through ODA programs and defense equipment and technology transfers.⁷⁵

Japan and Australia are also currently in talks over the passage of Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA), a legal framework aimed to bolster the two countries' joint operations and exercises.⁷⁶ It will facilitate the logistics and policy coordination of military operations, equipment transfers and intelligence sharing between the Australian Defense Force and Japan's Special Defense Force.⁷⁷ Recent developments within Australia-Japan relations also revive the possibility of Japan's involvement in the modernization of Australia's submarine fleet. After Japan failed to secure the production of Australian's new submarine fleet in 2016, a positive outlook is on the horizon as both states resume their engagement through the Bilateral Defense Industry Forum that commenced in 2017.

Despite their security alliance with the United States, the Philippines and Australia have yet to elevate their comprehensive partnership to a strategic level. Nonetheless, the relationship between the two countries has remained stable and very productive, notwithstanding occasional friction caused by diverging views concerning Human Rights and the rule of law.⁷⁸ Through its middle power diplomacy, Australia has been a reliable partner of the Philippines in the rehabilitation of Marawi City. To ensure sustainable peace and resiliency, Australia is closely coordinating with the Task Force Bangon Marawi, an interagency group formed by the Philippine government tasked to oversee the recovery of the war-torn city. Under its humanitarian aid program, Australia has provided financial aid totaling to AUD 30 million to alleviate the conditions of almost 320,000 internally displaced Filipinos affected by the failed uprising.⁷⁹ It is also in Australia's view that the resurgence of ISIS-linked groups to establish a caliphate of in the region is highly imminent.⁸⁰ Thus, in the aftermath of the conflict, Australia has engaged Filipino policymakers and stakeholders to undertake a whole-of-government post conflict operations to review current operational procedures and proposed future tactical interventions.⁸¹

Like Japan, Australia's capacity-building efforts to bolster the Philippines' maritime capacity is moving into a positive direction. Austal, an Australian shipbuilding company, will provide the Philippine Navy with six offshore patrol vessels (OPVs).⁸² Complete with a dedicated helicopter flight deck and latest naval technology, the vessels will be built locally by Austal's local subsidiary, Austal Philippines to ensure long-term maintenance and technical support.

Based on these recent developments in their respective bilateral partnerships, various points of convergence in the area of capacity building especially in maritime security cooperation or humanitarian and disaster relief build a viable case for the Philippines, Australia, and Japan to upgrade their existing links. The next step is to further harness these collaborative partnerships under a broader and coordinated trilateral framework.

Areas of Collaboration for Trilateral Cooperation

To concretely demonstrate the feasibility of proposed trilateral cooperation, this section outlines functional areas of collaboration among the Philippines, Australia, and Japan. The fundamental aims are twofold: (1) establish how the trilateral cooperation will allow the three spokes to transcend their traditional and asymmetrical roles as mere triads with respect to the U.S.-led San Francisco System, and (2) illustrate the prospects of various capacity-building initiatives that can support existing or lay the foundation for future efforts in regional order-building. Bound by mutual trust and shared strategic priorities, the key areas below highlight how the trilateral grouping can enhance their coordination beyond the traditional security paradigm to include emerging and non-traditional security threats emanating from terrorism, violent extremism, cyberspace and natural calamities or disasters.

Maritime Security Cooperation through Capacity Building

Since 2016, the security cooperation between the Philippines, Australia, and Japan has stepped up in the domain of maritime domain awareness and capacity building. Initially, Australia's engagement revolves around counterterrorism and combatting violent extremism while Japan concentrates on the South China Sea, but in recent times, a gradual focus has been invested in conducting joint military and naval exercises.

In addition to the strategic currency of joint-naval drills, the trilateral cooperation aims to connect the three countries and focus on bolstering interoperability through maritime capability-building. By capitalizing on Japan's leadership in the area of the defense industry and technology transfer, there is an appetite for the three countries to push the momentum further into a cooperative framework. Japan has been responsible for boosting the Philippines' intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capability in the maritime domain through its provision of sophisticated satellite and communications systems. Under its ODA, Japan provided the Philippine Coast Guard with multi-role response vehicles and aircraft units to improve the Philippine Navy's capacity to patrol the West Philippine Sea.⁸³ Meanwhile, after failing to secure the \$50 billion future submarine project from Australia in 2016, Japan has recently signaled its intention to replace Australia's aging Collins Class fleet.⁸⁴ The revival of Japan's proposal resurfaces amidst the potential fallout between France and Australia due to protracted contract negotiations.⁸⁵ As the scale and speed of China's gray zone strategy envelop the South China Sea, the deployment of naval assets for intelligence-gathering becomes critical. It will afford the trilateral cooperation more pro-active coordination among its Navy and Coast guard through real-time information sharing.

To further cement enduring maritime security cooperation and capability-building, the trilateral cooperation can also secure a maritime strategic asset located in Subic Bay, Philippines to allay fears of a potential Chinese takeover. After Hanjin Philippines plunged into bankruptcy, the Philippine government has been actively searching for potential partners to salvage the former U.S. Naval base. While an Australia-U.S. tandem is in the works to bid for the economically important dockyard, there is also a strong case for a Philippine-Australia-Japan consortium.⁸⁶ Under the trilateral cooperation framework, such venture becomes feasible especially with the strong presence of Australian and Japanese companies in the local shipbuilding industry in the Philippines. The Philippines-Australia-Japan joint venture perfectly complements the major goal of the Philippine Navy and Coastguard of securing the shipyard to maintain their naval assets and build their indigenous naval capabilities.

Humanitarian Relief and Disaster Response

Despite its constitutional limitations, Japan Self-Defense Forces (SDF) continues to play an active role in international cooperation especially in humanitarian assistance and disaster response (HADR). In 2015, the JSDF has conducted training in airlift operations with the Philippine Air Force in the event of large-scale natural disasters.⁸⁷ As part of its Indo-Pacific Endeavor Task Group, the Australian Defence Force and Philippine Marine Corps also participated in a four-day intensive HA/DR training exercise in Subic Bay in 2017.⁸⁸ This joint exercise also coincided with joint maritime support and interdiction between the Royal Australian Navy and the Philippine Navy.

From their bilateral engagements, the proposed trilateral cooperation can incorporate their experiences to mold an HADR coordinating framework. In addition to amphibious landings, search and rescue, military medicine, and disaster relief, they can also incorporate elements of air combat to large force employment training to increase readiness in times of environmental crisis. Aside from a government-to-government setup, the trilateral cooperation must also concentrate on promoting civilian capabilities through various trainings and seminars involving private companies and not-for-profit groups to meet the urgency of providing disaster relief.

Counterterrorism and Violent Extremism

The Marawi siege in 2017 was a game-changer as to how states approach counterterrorism and the spread of radicalization and violent extremism in the region. After the defeat of the ISIS-linked Maute brothers, Australia and Japan had undertaken concrete engagements to address the rehabilitation of the war-torn city from providing immediate relief-efforts to long-term interventions. Japan has been a key partner in rebuilding Marawi through its infrastructure development, while Australia continues to provide livelihood opportunities as well as psychosocial programs among internally

displaced families.⁸⁹ Simultaneously, Australia and Japan have also been very supportive of the Philippines' peace process in drafting the Bangsamoro Organic Law to end the decades-long of a protracted war in the restive south.

But even after the defeat of the Maute group, the re-emergence of ISIS continues to pose a serious threat to the region. To be effective, the participation of the Philippines, Australia, and Japan under the trilateral cooperation must neatly establish their roles in the overall counterterrorism and peacebuilding agenda. Japan's credibility in infrastructure development will be most helpful in the rehabilitation of war-torn sites. Japan fulfills an important role in laying the initial groundwork of transitioning internally displaced people from the condition of war to sustainable peace, while Australia can play an important role in training the Armed Forces of the Philippines in urban military warfare and improving civil-military relations. Likewise, the Philippines can share its tactical methods in defeating the Maute Group. It can emphasize its strategic use of soft power to counter the terrorists' propaganda machinery embedded through social media applications and messaging.

Furthermore, the tri-border corridor that involves overlapping parts of the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia remains to be a crucial backdoor that facilitates the transit of foreign fighters and possible ISIS recruits in Southeast Asia. This is an area where the Royal Australian Navy can join the Philippine Navy in patrolling and tightening border control. Altogether, the Philippines, Australia, and Japan can also cooperate in curbing the illicit transfer of financial support in the form of money laundering and other illegal means. The trilateral grouping can also share best practices in apprehending foreign terrorist fighters and potential recruits in their domestic courts as well as effective mediations in reintegrating former ISIS members in their local community.

Cybersecurity

The emergence and evolution of risks, threats, and vulnerabilities in cyberspace have been unprecedented. It is an area where the technological expertise, confidence-building measures, and capacity-building initiatives of the trilateral cooperation can focus to build more resilient cybersecurity. In this area, the primary goal is to craft a more predictive rather than reactive strategy that will allow the Philippines, Australia, and Japan to detect, respond and recover from cyberattacks in real-time.

As attribution remains a key challenge in cybersecurity, a joint threat intelligence framework among the Philippines, Australia, and Japan that involves key government agencies, military units, and the national Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT) will allow effective exchange of information regarding the nature, techniques, procedures and methods used by state-sponsored or non-state hackers. In addition to information sharing, regular cybersecurity drills are also vital as a preemptive strategy in the case of any cyberattack to critical infrastructures.

The trilateral cooperation can also broaden its strategic reach in the cyber domain by investing in research and development as well as workforce training. This can engender knowledge- and talent-exchange from leading universities, think tanks, private companies, and civil society organizations. Through partnership building, the trilateral cooperation can promote far more flexibility and creativity that can impact other aspects of cybersecurity from data privacy and protection to the advent of artificial intelligence, machine learning, robotics, and quantum technology.

In addition to their heavy investments in their cyber capabilities, Australia and Japan are also exploring policy and legal frameworks for cyber-related crimes and data governance. Both countries are also promoting acceptable norms, rules and values and the overall application of international law in the cyber arena in regional and international fora. While the Philippines is still at the nascent stage in bolstering its cyber capacity, its active involvement to similar multilateral agreements like the ASEAN Framework on Digital Data Governance is considered an important milestone in Southeast Asia.

Conclusion

The international rules-based order that has underpinned global politics in the past seventy years is under intense pressure. As the rising and incumbent power compete for dominance, states like the Philippines, Australia, and Japan that are bound by mutual trust and strategic interests cannot afford to stand idly. Instead, they must regroup, rethink, and refashion their existing roles as U.S. allies to become vanguards of regional cooperation and dialogue.

This paper has endeavored to sketch a potential pathway for the Philippines, Australia, and Japan to illustrate the underexplored potential they can derive from harnessing their individual strengths into a collective force and constitute an “intra-spoke” cooperation. Using the convergent security approach as the mechanism for such trilateral linkage, the spokes achieve greater diplomatic autonomy to realize their mutual interests without undermining their relationship with the hub. Based on the spokes’ converging interests towards engaging China, deepening U.S. commitment and reinforcing an inclusive regional multilateral framework, this paper has demonstrated that the underlying principles and foundational mechanisms that set the stage for the trilateral linkage to materialize are present. Therefore, by merging their existing bilateral relationships into a more comprehensive trilateral cooperation, the three countries can support order-building initiatives and can buttress regional stability and prosperity against the backdrop of an evolving multipolar world order.

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