

Australia, Japan and India: A trilateral coalition in the Indo- Pacific?

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Foreword



It is my honour to write the foreword to this timely report on trilateral co-operation between Australia, Japan and India. The three countries are vibrant democracies with shared values and desire for peace and prosperity of our region.

We find ourselves in a region in the spotlight as power structures we may have once taken for granted undergo a shift. Given our geostrategic environment is in a state of flux, the opportunity and imperative for trilateral co-operation between Japan, Australia and India in the Indo-Pacific region has never been greater. The outbreak of COVID 19 appears to have accelerated strategic competition between the US and China while tempting a certain party to pursue their own agenda whilst others are preoccupied with their response to the pandemic. All of this makes our trilateral co-operation even more urgent and relevant.

While still nascent, there is already broad consensus among Japan, Australia and India that our interests help realise our respective visions for the Indo-Pacific. Our visions articulate a desire for the rule of law, increased trade, stability and development.

We do not condone a “might is right” approach either in the South China Sea or elsewhere, and are determined to oppose any attempt to dominate or unilaterally impose changes to the status quo by force.

Our collective desire to ensure that peace and stability of our region has resulted in real, tangible developments in our force posture measures and security relationships. We engage in bilateral and multilateral exercises, and we have advocated for and actively engaged in regional representative fora such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association. We have expanded our government relations so that we each conduct foreign affairs and defence (2+2) dialogues at the ministerial level, and we are committed to broadening our economic relations for the long term.



Added emphasis can also be given to development co-operation between Australia and Japan in the South Pacific to meet that region's humanitarian and infrastructure needs, as well as Japan's joining India and Sri Lanka in a Memorandum of Co-operation aimed at improving Sri Lanka's port facilities.

The development of our strategic partnerships has in turn laid the groundwork for our trilateral co-operation. The strategic alignment of our interests is perhaps best illustrated by the virtual summits held respectively between the leaders of Japan and Australia, and Australia and India during the course of June and July this year.

We share the intention to uphold the rules-based order for the region and work closely with ASEAN in support of their unity and centrality to our regional frameworks. Given the strategic weight of the three countries, I believe that Japan, Australia and India can collectively contribute to creating a strategic equilibrium that ensures the rule of law in the Indo-Pacific by further enhancing co-operation in diplomatic, economic and military areas.

The thesis outlined within this report by Dr Jeffrey Wilson and Dr Priya Chacko highlights these aspects and other commonalities shared between our three countries over the last decade, and points to the potential for greater co-operation between us in the Indo-Pacific as we navigate this challenging geostrategic environment. It is my sincere hope that through this report, the reader will grasp to potency manifest within the trilateral relationship, and will come to appreciate the sterling contribution that both Dr Wilson and Dr Chacko have made to the discussion on this topic.

His Excellency Reiichiro Takahashi
AMBASSADOR OF JAPAN TO AUSTRALIA



Executive summary

In recent years, Australia, Japan and India have been active proponents of the Indo-Pacific regional concept. They share an outlook regarding the future of regional order, which emphasises free, open, inclusive and rules-based principles for governance.

As existing regional institutions have struggled to adapt to 21st century realities, the three governments have begun developing new diplomatic platforms to realise these shared outlooks.

A semi-formal 'AJI coalition' began to coalesce in 2008, following the collapse of the first incarnation of the Quadrilateral Dialogue. In the years since, this AJI coalition has developed an institutional architecture, and made several contributions to Indo-Pacific order.

But despite their shared outlooks, differences in national interests – particularly in the economic and security spheres – place limits on how far trilateral cooperation can advance. It is important to calibrate its agenda to the opportunities and constraints facing the three governments.

The future of the AJI coalition rests in collaborative and bottom-up diplomacy to build consensus around principles and norms. This should leverage existing institutions and processes to amplify collective voice in an era when the Indo-Pacific is riven by great power conflict.



概要

近年、オーストラリア、日本、インドが、インド太平洋地域構想において強い支持を表明している。この三カ国は、地域秩序の将来に関する展望を共有しており、これはガバナンスを目的とした、自由かつオープンで包括的な、ルールに基づく原則を強調している。

既存の地域機関が21世紀の現実に対応することに苦闘していたため、これら三国政府は、前述の共通の展望を実現するための新しい外交プラットフォームの開発に着手した。

半公式の「AJI連合」は、初の四国間対話の具体化に失敗したことを受け、2008年に連合を開始した。これ以降、AJI連合は組織構造を発展させ、インド太平洋の秩序に数度の貢献をしてきた。

しかし、こうした共通の展望とは裏腹に、国益の違い、特に経済と安全保障の分野における相違は、三国間協調をどこまで進められるかについて、その可能性に制限を課している。そのため、三国政府が直面する機会と制約に関する検討課題の調整が重要である。

AJI連合の未来は、原則と規範に基づくコンセンサスを構築する、協調的なボトムアップ外交にかかっている。このような外交手段は、既存の制度とプロセスを活用し、インド太平洋地域が大きな権力に関する対立によって分裂した時代において、集団としての人々の声を増幅することになるであろう。



कार्यकारी सारांश

हाल के वर्षों में ऑस्ट्रेलिया, जापान और भारत एक भारत-प्रशांत क्षेत्रीय अवधारणा के सक्रिय प्रस्तावक रहे हैं। क्षेत्रीय व्यवस्था के भविष्य के बारे में उनका एक सांझा दृष्टिकोण है, जो प्रशासन के लिए स्वतंत्र, खुले, समावेशी और नियमों पर आधारित सिद्धांतों पर बल देता है।

मौजूदा क्षेत्रीय संस्थानों द्वारा 21वीं सदी की वास्तविकताओं के प्रति अनुकूलन के लिए संघर्ष करने के साथ-साथ तीनों सरकारों ने इन राजनैतिक दृष्टिकोणों को यथार्थ बनाने के लिए नए राजनयिक मंचों का विकास आरंभ कर दिया है।

चतुर्भुज संवाद (Quadrilateral Dialogue) के पहले आविर्भाव के पतन के बाद 2008 में एक अर्ध-औपचारिक 'एजेआई गठबंधन' (AJI coalition) संलीन होने लगा। इसके बाद के आने वाले वर्षों में इस एजेआई गठबंधन ने एक संस्थागत व्यवस्था विकसित की है, और भारत-प्रशांत तंत्र में अनेक योगदान दिए हैं।

परंतु अपने सांझा दृष्टिकोणों के बावजूद भी राष्ट्रीय हितों में मतभेदों के कारण – विशेषकर आर्थिक और सुरक्षा-संबंधी क्षेत्रों में – त्रिपक्षीय सहयोग का अग्रगमन सीमित हो जाता है। तीनों सरकारों के सामने आने वाले अवसरों और बाधाओं के प्रति इस सहयोग की कार्यसूची का मापन करना महत्वपूर्ण है।

एजेआई गठबंधन का भविष्य सहयोगी तथा निम्न-उच्च कूटनीति में निहित है, ताकि सिद्धांतों और मानदंडों के अनुरूप आम सहमति निर्मित की जा सके। भारत-प्रशांत क्षेत्र में शक्तियों के प्रबल संघर्ष की इस अवधि में मौजूदा संस्थानों और प्रक्रियाओं को सामूहिक आवाज मुखर करने हेतु इससे लाभ उठाना चाहिए।



Introduction

Australia, Japan and India have become active proponents of the Indo-Pacific concept for regionalism in Asia. They were early adopters of the Indo-Pacific, with all three governments having formally incorporated the term into their foreign policy lexicon by 2013¹. They have also been its principal advocates, encouraging other governments and international organisations to adopt a perspective which geographically extends the older 'Asia-Pacific' regional concept to include the Indian Ocean littoral. Their norm entrepreneurship has since contributed to seeing Indonesia² and ASEAN³ more comprehensively adopt the Indo-Pacific into their foreign policy frameworks more comprehensively.

However, for Australia, Japan and India, the Indo-Pacific is more than just a new geographic map of the region. It also reflects a shared set of outlooks regarding how regional politics and institutions should be organised. While national formulations have subtle variations in language, the common denominator is a commitment to 'free', 'open', 'inclusive' and 'rules-based' principles for regional governance. These outlooks are advocated as an implicit – but clearly deliberate – foil against a model of Indo-Pacific order structured by geopolitical competition and great power rivalry.

As existing institutions within the regional architecture have struggled to effectively adapt to 21st century realities, the three governments have sought to develop new diplomatic mechanisms to advance these shared goals. While early attempts focused on the "Quad" – a dialogue group combining Australia, Japan, India and the US – controversy over its form and purpose raise questions over its utility. As a consequence, it has been suggested that a semi-formal 'AJI coalition' may offer an important platform for advancing their outlooks and objectives for Indo-Pacific regionalism. Indeed, several functional initiatives reflecting these objectives have been launched by the governments in the last decade.

This report analyses the role a trilateral AJI coalition can potentially play in shaping Indo-Pacific regional order in coming years. It examines:

- How do the three countries view the contemporary Indo-Pacific, and what are the commonalities and differences in their outlooks?
- What initiatives involving the AJI coalition have been launched, and how successful have they proven?
- What are the enabling and constraining factors shaping their approach to regional cooperation?
- What is the art of the possible for future AJI trilateral cooperation?

The report demonstrates that the governments of Australia, Japan and India began functioning as a semi-formal minilateral coalition from around 2008, and have already made several important contributions to Indo-Pacific order. But despite shared outlooks, differences in their specific national interests – particularly in the economic and security spheres – place definitive limits on how far trilateral cooperation can advance. It argues that the future of the AJI coalition rests in collaborative and bottom-up diplomacy to build consensus around principles and norms. This should leverage existing institutions and processes to amplify collective voice in an era when the Indo-Pacific is riven by great power conflict.



**Shared outlooks?
The Indo-Pacific
strategies of
Australia, Japan
and India**





Japan, Australia and India have different conceptions of what would constitute an ideal regional order in the Indo-Pacific. As allies of the United States, Japan and Australia are comfortable with a US-centred regional order; while India – with its aspirations to become a great power and tradition of strategic autonomy – favours multipolarity. Nonetheless, all three states are eager to prevent Chinese dominance of the region, while continuing to benefit from their economic links to China. Moreover, all three desire a regional order that fosters cooperation rather than rivalry, given their exposure to coercive behaviour from the region's two major powers. They therefore share a basic strategic outlook on which deeper collaboration could be built.

The Indo-Pacific concept extended and formalised pre-existing ideas about the three countries' expanding regional roles.

In the case of Japan, the precursor to its adoption of the Indo-Pacific regional framework was Abe Shinzo's 'Confluence of the Two Seas' speech to the Indian parliament in 2007⁴, which articulated the notion of a 'broader Asia' which linked the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Though Abe's term as Prime Minister ended soon afterward, he continued to promote the idea as a way of securing Japan and the region against China's growing power while furthering his goal of 'normalising' Japan's security posture. Of particular importance was enabling Japan to more effectively engage in military cooperation, particularly through what he termed the 'democratic security diamond' of Japan, the US, India and Australia⁵.

After returning to power, Abe explicitly adopted the Indo-Pacific concept into Japanese foreign policy in 2013. However, the idea was finessed in its second appearance, with rhetoric on the threat from China and the democratic security diamond toned down. In its place, Abe envisaged "a network, broad enough to ensure safety and prosperity encompassing the two oceans". This network was to be normatively

underpinned by a "open, free and peaceful" vision for the region, based on values like "freedom of thought, expression, and speech", which would be "governed by laws and rules" and allow "the free exchange of people"⁶.

This doctrine was formalised with the adoption of Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy in 2016. Geographically, it called for a conjoining of continents (Asia and Africa) and oceans (the Pacific and Indian) with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) as the facilitating link. Within this vast region, Japan pledged to foster democracy, capacity building, the rule of law, a market economy and freedom from force or coercion⁷. In 2019, the FOIP 'strategy' became a FOIP 'vision', with an emphasis on inclusiveness and utilising existing regional institutions to realise its ambitions. This rhetorical shift allowed Japan to present FOIP as a cooperative endeavour, against arguments it was exclusionary towards China. However, it also included plans for boosting trade, investment, infrastructure, energy, and maritime security – a clear riposte to China's Belt and Road Initiative⁸.

Japan's advocacy of an 'inclusive' Indo-Pacific concept is well-aligned to the regional outlooks of Australia and India.

The precursor to India's embrace of the Indo-Pacific was the 'Look East' policy fashioned in the 1990s, which sought to increase India's economic and political ties to Northeast and Southeast Asia. The Indo-Pacific concept began to appear in foreign policy statements from 2012, by this time with a more expansive geographical frame that like Japan's including the Indian Ocean littoral and Africa. India's Indo-Pacific encompasses the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean regions, including eastern Africa, East Asia, Southeast Asia with the Malacca Strait and South China Sea as the key sea lanes. 'Inclusiveness' has consistently been a central feature of India's Indo-Pacific outlook which "includes all nations in this geography as also others beyond who have a stake in it", particularly the US and Russia, a long-time partner⁹.



This emphasis on inclusiveness reflects the endurance of 'strategic autonomy' as India's guiding foreign policy principle. In a partial break with its Cold War stance of non-alignment, strategic autonomy takes the form of non-ideological issue-based alignments with a variety of partners, while maintaining an aversion to formal alliances¹⁰. The Russia-India-China (RIC) and Japan-America-India (JAI) trilateral forums in particular are identified as 'significant interactions' for the practice of strategic autonomy in the Indo-Pacific theatre. These minilateral fora are important, as they allow India to exercise leadership while limiting the power of the US (through the RIC coalition) and the influence of China (through JAI)¹¹.

As with Japan, India places emphasis on a rules-based regional architecture centered around ASEAN institutions. It claims to engage with the region through the 'ideals of democracy', an open economy and international law, with a particular focus on linking South and Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean region¹². Rather than being a 'strategy' or 'dominance-seeking club' aimed at a particular country, India's Indo-Pacific outlook envisions the coordination of independent players working for the global good¹³. Inclusiveness does, however, have limits. This is most evident in the Indian Ocean where India has asserted – with China clearly in its sights – that initiatives must "naturally accord due primacy to the States located in the geography of the Indian Ocean"¹⁴. Also in implicit reference to China, Indian statements on the Indo-Pacific stress the 'rules' of sovereignty and territorial integrity, freedom of navigation and unimpeded commerce and India's adherence to 'ideals of democracy'¹⁵.

Australia has also taken a slow but progressive road to its Indo-Pacific outlook. An early precursor was Prime Minister Rudd's Asia-Pacific Community (APC) proposal of 2008, which included the US, Japan, China, India and Indonesia as key actors in regional dialogue and cooperation. The APC ideas appeared in its 2009 Defence White Paper, which highlighted the need to create a rules-based order and asserted that by 2030, the Indian Ocean would be as central to maritime defence as the Pacific Ocean¹⁶. The APC was soon abandoned

due to a negative response from Southeast Asian governments, which perceived it as usurping ASEAN Centrality in the regional architecture¹⁷. However, several of its features appeared in the 2013 Defence White Paper, which formally adopted the Indo-Pacific as Australia's official descriptor of the region¹⁸.

Like Japan and India, Australia places significant emphasis on cooperation and rules-based order as key principles for regionalism in the Indo-Pacific. It also promotes bilateralism and multilateral cooperation, an open trading system, recognises the central role ASEAN institutions, and emphasises inclusiveness. However, there are also some key differences. Geographically, its definition of the Indo-Pacific extends to India, but does not capture the western margins of Indian Ocean littoral or Africa. It has articulated its outlooks in defence (rather than foreign policy) white papers, thus placing a greater emphasis on defence over economic aspects of its strategy. Its emphasis on inclusiveness also explicitly seeks to maintain a significant US presence in the region¹⁹, a feature shared with Japan but to a far less extent India. In addition, and with implicit reference to China, Australia's Indo-Pacific outlook emphasises international law, respect for sovereignty, and "the rights of small states" with a particular focus on the Pacific Islands, and occasionally the importance of 'democratic norms and liberal institutions'²⁰.

While sharing common features, the Indo-Pacific outlooks of Australia, Japan and India also reflect different strategic preoccupations.

Of the three countries, Japan has the most expansive regional vision, and has made the most effort to devise plans to engage and integrate the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Australia's more restrictive geographic frame and reflects its continued focus on the Pacific Ocean; whereas India's priorities lie in the Indian Ocean. India's emphasis on strategic autonomy distinguishes it from Japan and Australia, who place a higher value on preserving a US role in the region given their formal alliances. Japan has made economic cooperation a more



prominent element than Australia or India, though all include it to some degree. They also differ in their normative framing, with Japan emphasising democracy and liberal social principles as a shared value for the region in its early statements, Australia occasionally highlighting the importance of a liberal rules-based order and democratic practices and India touting its own democratic status but not a liberal regional order.

Despite these differences, however, there is clearly a minimal shared foundation to their regional strategic outlooks. Centrally, this is built around desire for regional multilateralism and some sort of rules-based order, which help manage contestation as regional power hierarchies change. In an era where many of these preferences – particularly a

preference for rules-based multilateralism – have come under strain, imperatives have emerged for some degree of foreign policy coordination amongst the trilateral. Given the relative weight of the group in the Indo-Pacific, it is argued they could potentially function as an effective coalition for advancing these interests in key regional fora²¹. All three countries share a concern regarding the future role of a more assertive China in the region, albeit with a clear desire to ensure their Indo-Pacific outlooks are inclusive of a constructive Chinese role. And at its most foundational, they all agree that India should be better included into key regional institutions and processes, and that this should be recognised in the region's conceptual vocabulary through the Indo-Pacific moniker.





Deepening collaboration amongst the AJI coalition





The case for the AJI coalition instantiates broader arguments for the increasing utility of minilateral diplomacy. It is widely accepted that in the early years of the 21st century, existing multilateral institutions and processes have struggled to provide effective platforms for international cooperation. In this context, it has been suggested that minilateral mechanisms – diplomacy involving small groups of like-minded governments – can deliver better results. Minilateral processes offer advantages of flexibility and informality over larger bodies²², and can manage challenges of normative dissensus by restricting participation to only likeminded governments²³. They also facilitate simpler coalition building, a favoured diplomatic strategy of ‘middle powers’ which must use collective approaches to promote their interests²⁴.

The AJI trilateral is potentially the strongest example of a minilateral coalition in the Indo-Pacific today.

The three governments consistently state an intention to coordinate their regional diplomacy. This is reflected in the recent adoption of the term “strategic partnership” to describe their bilateral relations, with Australia-Japan adding “special”, Australia-India “comprehensive” and India-Japan “special global” as superlative prefixes²⁵. These labels are designed to telegraph that they see each other as preferred diplomatic partners, bound by outlooks and interests deeper than those shared with others in the region. And in recent years, there is certainly evidence of these shared outlooks informing deliberate attempts at cooperation amongst the group.

The most prominent example is participation in the “Quad”. First established in 2007, it is a dialogue group involving Australia, Japan, India and the US with a maritime focus. The Quad has a complex and contested history, largely due to Chinese objections to the dialogue and at-times wavering commitment from its members (Figure 1). Its initial incarnation collapsed due to Australian withdrawal in 2007, before being re-established in late 2017 as a senior officials meeting held on the sidelines of other regional summits. Dialogues have grown in frequency since, with a stand-alone Foreign Ministers’ meeting occurring in 2019, and a “Quad Plus” teleconference to discuss COVID-19 responses in March 2020.

Questions remain over the purpose and objectives of the rebooted Quad, and the role of the US therein. Since its first inception, the principal controversy concerned whether it was a vehicle for the containment of Chinese maritime ambitions²⁶. Despite official descriptions stressing a diverse range of shared interests²⁷, the Quad has been perceived by many across the region²⁸ – including in China²⁹ – as an anti-China bloc. These views were reinforced in October 2019, when the US Secretary of State indicated the re-established Quad would help ensure that “China retains only its proper place in the world”³⁰.

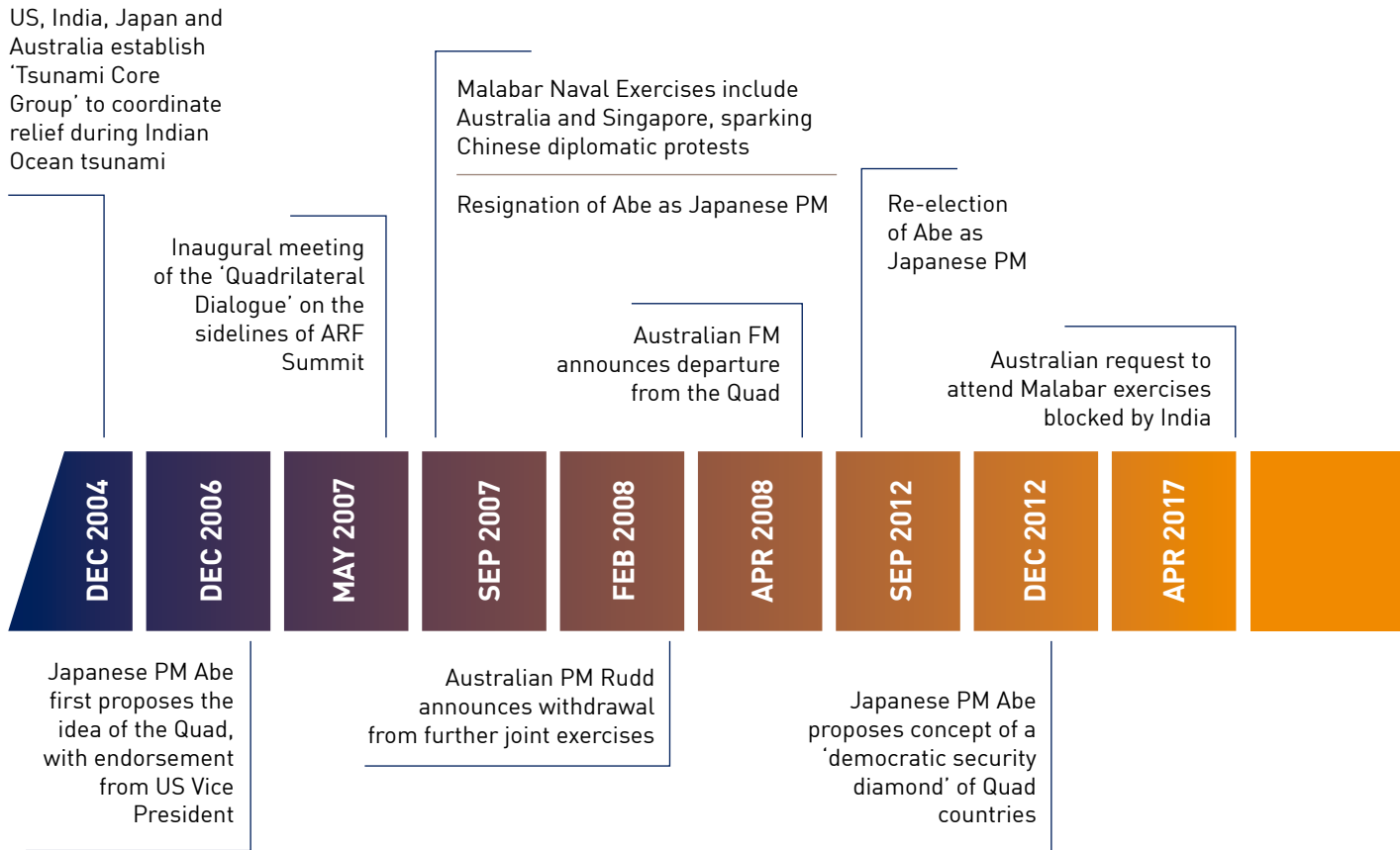
The extent to which the US agenda in the Quad is shared by Australia, Japan or India is a matter for debate. But as the other governments have been at pains to present the Quad in non-confrontational terms as a consultative forum, it certainly signals a divergence of views as to how it should be explained to other regional partners and China. India’s statements on meetings of the four countries, in particular, consistently avoid mentioning the ‘Quad’ or coded references to Chinese behaviour in the South China Sea, such as freedom of navigation, in contrast to the other three countries³¹. Questions over the Trump Administration’s security commitment to the region also raise doubts regarding the US contribution to Quad initiatives³².

Of course, the Quad is not the only vehicle for realising the ambitions of the AJI trilateral.

During its decade-long hiatus, the breadth and density of cooperative mechanisms between Australia, Japan and India expanded dramatically (see Table 1). These mechanisms now cover the full spectrum of diplomatic activities. The foundational element are ‘strategic partnerships’ established bilaterally between the three governments, supported through annual ‘2+2’ joint Foreign and Defence meetings. These have enabled a large number of functional cooperation initiatives to be established across the defence and economic domains: including information sharing agreements in the security space, economic policy dialogues and free trade agreements, as well as participation in bilateral and multilateral naval and air exercises.



Figure 1 Timeline of the Quadrilateral Dialogue





Japanese FM Kono announces Japan will propose a dialogue with the US, India and Australia

US President Trump signs the *Asia Reassurance Initiative Act*, affirming commitment to 'Quad 2.0'

Inaugural Quad Foreign Ministers meeting in New York

US President announces efforts to "revitalise" Quad initiative during trip to India

Teleconference of "Quad Plus" countries (incl RoK, VN and NZ) discuss COVID-19 response

OCT 2017

NOV 2017

DEC 2017

JAN 2018

JUN 2018

SEP 2019

OCT 2019

FEB 2020

MAR 2020

Japanese, Indian, Australian and US officials met in Manila ahead of ASEAN and EAS Summits

Navy chiefs from Australia, India, Japan and the US meet at Raisina Dialogue




Second Quad officials meeting in Singapore on sidelines of ASEAN senior officials' meeting

US Secretary of State Pompeo telegraphs the Quad as vehicle for China-containment

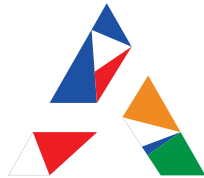




Table 1 Functional cooperation mechanisms between Australia, Japan and India

	G-to-G platforms	Defence and security	Economics
 <p>AUSTRALIA– JAPAN</p>	<p>Basic Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation (1976)</p> <p>2+2 Foreign and Defence Ministerials (2007-)</p> <p>“Special Strategic Partnership” (2014)</p>	<p>Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation (2007)</p> <p>Acquisition and cross-servicing agreement (2013)</p> <p>Information security agreement (2013)</p> <p>Transfer of equipment and technology agreement (2014)</p> <p>Bilateral joint exercises (<i>Bushido Guardian</i> 2019-)</p> <p>Multilateral joint exercises (<i>Talisman Sabre</i> 2015-)</p>	<p>APEC members (1989-)</p> <p>Cyber policy dialogues (2014-)</p> <p>Bilateral free trade agreement (JAIPA) (2015)</p> <p>Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (2017)</p> <p>Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (2013-)</p> <p>Ministerial Economic Dialogue (2018-)</p>
 <p>JAPAN– INDIA</p>	<p>Japan-India Prime Ministerial Summits (2009-)</p> <p>2+2 Foreign and Defence Ministerials (2019-)</p> <p>“Special Global Strategic Partnership” (2015)</p>	<p>Transfer of defence equipment and technology agreement (2015)</p> <p>Security measures for protection of classified military information agreement (2015)</p> <p>Cooperation between Indian Navy and Japan MSDF implementing agreement (2018)</p> <p>Bilateral joint exercises (<i>Dharma Guardian</i> 2018-, <i>Shinyu-Maitri</i> 2019-)</p> <p>Multilateral joint exercises (<i>Malabar</i> 2002-)</p>	<p>Bilateral free trade agreement (JI-CEPA) (2011)</p> <p>Cyber policy dialogue (2012-)</p> <p>Investment promoting partnership (2014)</p> <p>Social security agreement (2016)</p> <p>Cooperation in peaceful use of nuclear energy agreement (2017)</p> <p>Coordination forum for development of the north-eastern region (2017)</p> <p>Space dialogues (2019-)</p> <p>Digital partnership (2018)</p>
 <p>AUSTRALIA– INDIA</p>	<p>“Strategic Partnership” (2009)</p> <p>2+2 Foreign and Defence Secretariats (2017-), upgraded to Ministerials (2020)</p> <p>Foreign Ministers Framework Dialogues (2017-)</p> <p>“Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” (2020)</p>	<p>Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation (2009)</p> <p>Framework for Security Cooperation (2014)</p> <p>Bilateral joint exercises (<i>Ausindex</i>, 2015-)</p> <p>Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement (2020)</p> <p>Defence Science and Technology Implementing Agreement (2020)</p>	<p>Civil nuclear cooperation agreement (2014)</p> <p>Cyber policy dialogues (2015-)</p> <p>Maritime dialogue (2018-)</p> <p>Energy Dialogue (2014-)</p> <p>Cyber and cyber-enabled critical technology framework agreement</p> <p>Shared Vision for Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific (2020)</p>

Importantly, these AJI cooperative mechanisms are relatively new. Very few of existed prior to the initial establishment of the Quad, with growth accelerating dramatically during the decade in which the Quad was in hiatus (2008-2017). This reflects a strategy of using bottom-up functional cooperation to augment the AJI coalition, during a period where political controversy constrained the top-down Quad initiative. They also reveal a desire by the Australian, Japanese and Indian governments to put in place the diplomatic infrastructure required for coalitional diplomacy.



Despite the scope and scale of these mechanisms for functional cooperation, there are notable asymmetries within the three legs:

The Australia-Japan relationship

is the longest standing within the trilateral. It was first established in the 1960s, and built upon a mutually-beneficial trade relationship in mineral resources³³. Economic cooperation remains a prominent focus today, evident in their bilateral FTA and joint efforts to successfully resurrect the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) following the withdrawal of the US³⁴. Security cooperation has been a more recent addition to the relationship, with several defence agreements and joint exercises established since 2015. The incorporation of formal security cooperation – for the first time in their history – reflects Australia and Japan’s shared anxieties over both Chinese behaviour and the reliability of US alliance guarantees³⁵.

The Japan-India relationship

has rapidly grown in the last five years, to now match the breadth and density of Australia-Japan. Much of this growth can be attributed to efforts by the Modi and (second) Abe governments, and their 2015 declaration of a “special global strategic partnership”³⁶. A complex array of bilateral mechanisms has since been established across the economics, defence, technology and social policy domains. While this relationship building is commonly attributed to shared security concerns regarding China³⁷, it is noteworthy that economic cooperation also features prominently. Japan is the leading foreign investor in Indian infrastructure projects³⁸, and is one of only two developed economies with which India has concluded a bilateral FTA (alongside Korea).

The Australia-India relationship

is the weakest link in the trilateral. Prior to 2020, it was the only dyad whose “2+2” meeting is conducted at secretarial (rather than ministerial) level, the only strategic partnership without the adjective “special”, and there were no formal defence cooperation agreements. These gaps were closed by agreements made during the Prime Ministerial “virtual summit” of June 2020³⁹, but at time of writing have yet to be put into action. Economic ties have also been constrained by a lack of progress in negotiations for a bilateral FTA, which commenced in 2011 but had quickly stalled by 2015, before tentatively restarting in 2020⁴⁰. There are presently no bilateral trade or investment instruments between Australia and India. This has seen the bilateral trade relationship – which was already under-developed – actually *diminish* in importance during the last decade⁴¹.



There have also been two major ‘missed opportunities’ for cooperation amongst the AJI group.

On the defence side, Australia’s absence from the Malabar naval exercises has proven a sore point. Established as an India-US joint exercise in 1992, Malabar has been held annually since 2002. In 2007, Australia was invited to the Malabar exercise for the first time, alongside Japan and Singapore. However after the disintegration of the Quad it reverted back to an India-US exercise. In 2015, Malabar was upgraded to the trilateral level to formally include Japan as a permanent member⁴². Since 2017, attempts have been made for Australia to re-engage, which have been consistently vetoed by India. While no formal explanation has been provided, some analysts have suggested that making Malabar a “Quad” exercise would complicate India’s relationship with China⁴³. Others have suggested that India’s reticence is related to its misgivings regarding Australia’s abrupt withdrawal from the Quad in 2007⁴⁴.

On the economic side, India’s departure from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement has frustrated both Australia and Japan. Under negotiation since 2013, RCEP is a multilateral FTA which aims to create a single trade bloc amongst the ASEAN Plus Six countries. After parties completed an initial agreement in

November 2019, India suddenly announced its withdrawal, citing concerns over increased imports from China. However, the geopolitical consequences of a trade agreement with China (irrespective of its economic impacts) clearly loomed large in Indian thinking⁴⁵. The decision came as a major shock to the Australian and Japanese governments, who had worked hard to address Indian concerns during negotiations. Both have declared an intent to support India to rejoin the agreement⁴⁶, but given significant India-China differences this outcome seems unlikely⁴⁷.

This indicates that the AJI coalition still has significant room to grow.

In the last decade, there has been a step-wise increase in the breath and density of diplomatic mechanisms, revealing a clear intent to increase collaboration amongst the group. That most of these initiatives are located outside of the Quad framework demonstrates the trilateral is not bound to the Quad process, and has agendas well beyond the domain of maritime security. However, the Australia-India link lags behind the others, while India’s departure from RCEP and Australia’s absence from Malabar are significant missed opportunities. While the AJI trilateral now clearly functions as a diplomatic coalition in Indo-Pacific politics, it has some way to go if it is to realise the full spectrum of its members’ declared ambitions.



Opportunities and constraints for trilateral cooperation





The foundations for trilateral cooperation between Australia, Japan and India have already been erected. The governments share commonalities in their Indo-Pacific outlooks, recognise each other as preferred diplomatic partners, and in the last decade have established a range of formal mechanisms for collaboration. Yet the mixed record of past efforts also demonstrates there are distinct limits upon how the trilateral might grow. A shared *outlook* does not imply perfectly overlapping *interests*, and clear differences remain between their strategic priorities in the region. What are the opportunities and constraints for cooperation as the AJI coalition matures in coming years?

Defending freedom of navigation and rule of law has been a constant feature of the three countries' Indo-Pacific rhetoric. Bilateral and trilateral naval exercises have become increasingly frequent. They have also displayed their commitment to a rules-based maritime order by becoming signatories to the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and by using international dispute resolution mechanisms to mediate conflicts⁴⁸. All three countries have also refrained from participating in US Freedom of Navigation Operations Programs (FONOPs), avoiding a more confrontational approach toward China in the South China Sea.

Greater cooperation in maritime security appears to be a natural avenue for the AJI coalition. There are, however, several pressing constraints.

India's former Foreign Secretary, Vijay Gokhale, has called for greater collaboration between like-minded countries in developing an underwater domain awareness strategy, citing shared concerns – including with Australia – about China's use of civilian research vessels for military purposes⁴⁹. Yet, while India, Australia and Japan maintain a commitment to open seas, there are differences on issues related to international maritime law and maritime order.

Like the US, Australia and Japan recognise 'innocent passage' in international maritime law to include the right of warships to pass through Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) without prior notification. In contrast, and despite its criticisms of China's activities in the South China Sea, India's position on EEZs is similar to that of China. India rejects the US, Australian and Japanese interpretation of international law, insisting on prior consent for military exercises and manoeuvres, and prior notification of foreign warships in the EEZ. India's interpretations of international maritime law are not simply the prevailing worldview of incumbent policymakers that are readily changeable. Rather, they have been "deeply cemented into a body of domestic legislation that has evolved over the course of several decades"⁵⁰.

These differences on maritime law are due to the three countries' approaches to securing their broader strategic interests. Japan's and Australia's stances on freedom of navigation reflect their reliance on the deterrence effect of US military presence in the region⁵¹. India's approach is tied to its desire for strategic autonomy and the protection of sovereignty. For the same reason, it is unlikely that India will accede to Australia's requests to join the Malabar exercises. This would introduce a military (and potentially ideological) component into the Quad, which India has consistently been anxious to avoid as it would complicate its policy of strategic autonomy.

This raises the broader issue of the alignment of Australia, Japan and India's strategic interests in relation to China and the US. All three countries share concerns about a Chinese-dominated region, and the maintenance of regional engagement by the US. However, the drivers of these concerns are distinctive and somewhat incongruent.

India's major concern is China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean and South Asian regions, the ongoing border dispute, and the preservation of its strategic autonomy. At the same time, India recognises the value of Chinese investment in the country, and the roles of both China and Russia in challenging the status quo in global institutions and order. Its approach to China therefore tends to fluctuate.



In the last three years, India has been combative in relation to border tensions – as demonstrated by the Doklam standoff in 2017, the violent faceoff between troops in the Galwan Valley in 2020, and India’s boycotting of the BRI which passes through disputed territory. Relations improved following the discussions between Modi and Xi Jinping in 2017 and 2018, but the re-emergence of border tensions in 2020 points to the limits of such summity without a resolution of underlying disagreements⁵². Wariness has grown since the deaths of 20 Indian soldiers in the Galwan Valley incident and is exacerbated by China’s support for Pakistan at the UN, and India’s economic vulnerability to a stronger Chinese economy⁵³.

Japan and Australia’s concerns centre on the challenge posed by China to the status quo, and their primary interests lie in the Pacific Ocean. Chinese activities in the South China Sea and East China have been emphasised as major concerns by both countries. In contrast, the South China Sea is a secondary area of interest for India which has remained neutral in China Sea disputes. With respect to Australia, over the last three years relations with China have soured due a number of tensions including allegations of Chinese interference in Australian domestic politics, Australia’s barring of the telecommunications company Huawei from bidding in the construction of its 5G network and its push for an inquiry into origins of the COVID-19 global health pandemic which began in China⁵⁴. Japan has territorial disputes and war-time legacies that create tensions in its relationship with China, but relations have improved in recent years with a growing trading relationship. In comparison, though China is a key investor in several dynamic sectors in the Indian economy, it has a big trade deficit with China which is a source of tension⁵⁵.

All three countries have been subject to Chinese economic sanctions during times of conflict.

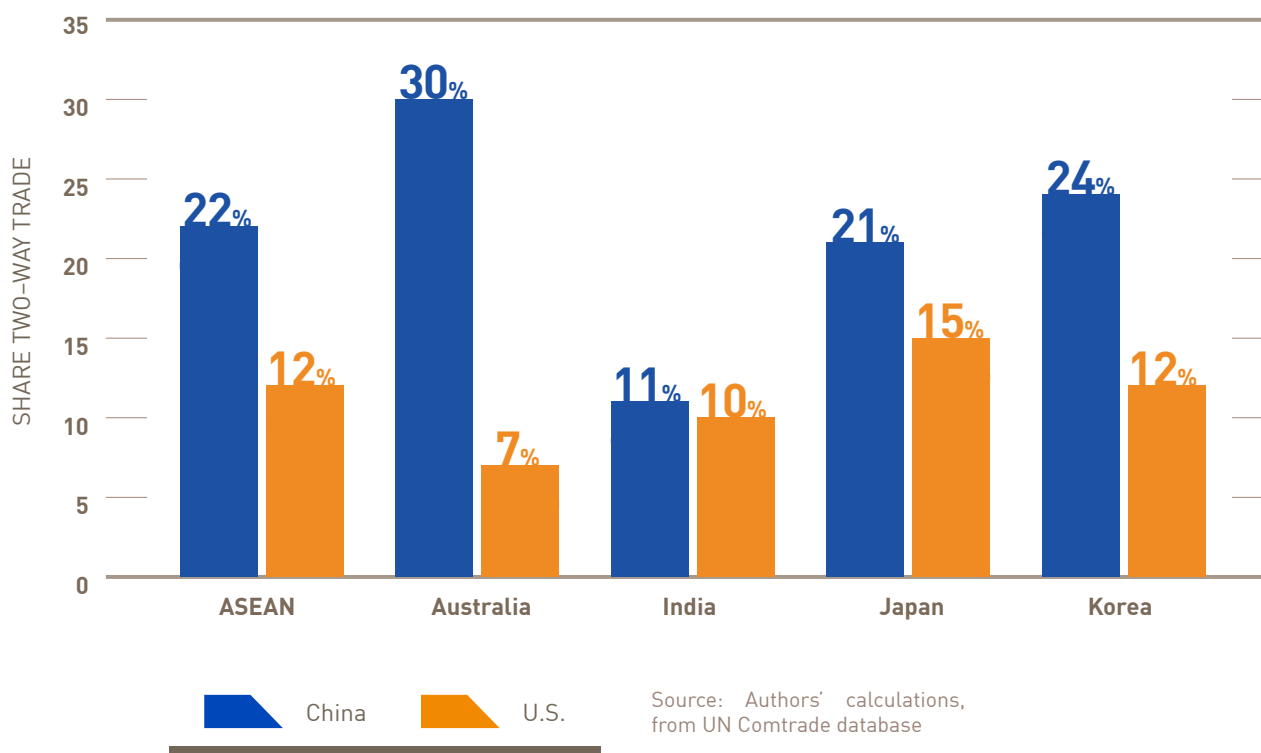
During the Doklam dispute, China stopped sharing hydrological data on the Brahmaputra River with India⁵⁶. During a diplomatic dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in 2010, China suspended exports of rare earth minerals – an essential input for electronics manufacturing – to Japan for approximately two months⁵⁷. In May 2020, China imposed trade restrictions against Australian beef and barley exports, which was widely understood to be a retaliatory move for Australia’s advocacy for an independent international investigation into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic⁵⁸. China has threatened ‘reverse sanctions’ against India if it excludes Huawei from its 5G mobile deployment⁵⁹, a move which Australia, Japan and the US have already made.

These examples of sanctioning highlights the costs of economic dependence on China, and provide incentives for the pursuit of other partnerships.

It is worth noting that this dependence is not even amongst the AJI group. India’s trade exposure to China is low by regional standards at 11 percent of two-way trade, while Japan’s is twice as high and Australia’s a massive 30 percent (see Figure 2). This means India faces less pressing imperatives to diversify – it trades as much with the US as with China – than Australia or Japan. Nonetheless, India’s reliance on China in critical sectors such as pharmaceuticals, manufacturing and telecommunications means, and their more fractious relationship, means that diversification is an increasingly pressing issue. Trade diversification, however, will be difficult for all three countries. Chinese investments in India’s telecommunications sector through companies like Xiaomi and Huawei, for example, will be challenging to replace, either through domestic or other foreign investment⁶⁰. Given existing industrial patterns in the region, Australia’s major resource exports – in particular, iron ore – will remain dependent on Chinese buyers in the medium term. The depth and complexity of value chains connecting the Chinese and Japanese economies would also prove complex and costly to disentangle.



Figure 2 Trade exposure of Indo-Pacific economies to China and the US, 2018



When it comes to economic objectives, India is a clear outlier. Where Australia and Japan are high-income countries, India is a lower-middle income country with a young unemployed/underemployed population and declared ambitions for rapid industrialisation. This translates into very distinct economic policy preferences, which have been a major liability when it comes to trade cooperation.

Australia and Japan are not only committed trade liberalisers, but also seek agreements such as investment, intellectual property and digital commerce. This is evident in their joint efforts to resurrect the high-standard TPP agreement in 2018, following the withdrawal of the US⁶¹. India maintains far higher levels of trade protection⁶², and is unwilling to engage in liberalising initiatives that clash with its trade policy priorities. These include the promotion of local manufacturing and employment through the 'Make in India' program, protecting its fragile agricultural sector from competition, and advancing trade in services issues.

Its departure from the (much lower ambition) RCEP agreement in 2019, citing concerns regarding the effect of Chinese manufacturing imports and its unmet demands for services sector liberalisation, especially in the movement of workers – in spite of assiduous lobbying by both Australia and Japan – reveals this tension⁶³.

It is unlikely that India will participate in trade agreements which meet Australia and Japan's ambitions. Trade, however, is only part of the economic story.

Infrastructure is a domain where outlook and interests align. Given its rapid urbanisation, India faces a range of 'infrastructure gaps' across the transport, urban and digital sectors. The ADB has recently estimated it will require \$4.3 trillion of investment by 2030 to meet India's needs, which will require significant foreign investment to be financed⁶⁴. Infrastructure cooperation has been a lynchpin of the Japan-India relationship,



particularly following a bilateral infrastructure cooperation agreement in 2017⁶⁵. India is the single largest recipient of Japanese overseas development assistance (of which a large portion targets infrastructure)⁶⁶, and several major projects – including the flagship Delhi Metro – have received support under Japan’s Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (PQI) program⁶⁷. Infrastructure cooperation has not yet become a prominent component of the Australia-India relationship, in part due to Australia’s more limited capabilities in construction⁶⁸, and its orientation towards the Pacific Islands in its infrastructure diplomacy⁶⁹. However, given Australia’s infrastructure cooperation with both ASEAN⁷⁰ and Japan⁷¹, there is no reason it could not be advanced with India as well.

Critical minerals is another possible domain of economic cooperation. These are a group of thirty minerals – such as lithium, rare earths and cobalt – which are essential for technologies across the science, digital and defence sectors⁷². However, they also suffer high supply insecurity, due to monopolies within existing global value chains. China’s suspension of rare earth exports to Japan during the Senkaku crisis of 2010 illustrates their potential use as a tool of economic coercion⁷³. Australia’s rich endowment of critical minerals, Japan’s advanced manufacturing capabilities, and India’s burgeoning technological needs, creates a shared interest in cooperation amongst the group. The intergovernmental infrastructure is already in place, with Australia having agreed critical minerals cooperation agreements with Japan (2010)⁷⁴, the US (2019)⁷⁵ and India (2020)⁷⁶. There is scope for trilateral cooperation to build new and more secure critical mineral value chains that leverage the respective assets of the three countries.

Coordinated diplomacy on the regional and global stages is also an important opportunity. One of

the main arguments for minilateral coalitions is that their members can coordinate activities in larger fora, amplifying their voice into multilateral. However, the scope for such coordination amongst the AJI trilateral is shaped by differential membership patterns. Australia and Japan are well-ensconced in regional and global governance, sharing membership in many key institutions (Table 2). But owing to historical legacies, India is far less integrated with the regional architecture. Beyond the Quad, the governments only share full membership in three major institutions: the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit, and the G20. This fact alone means there are comparatively few opportunities for the governments to collaborate in other platforms. Nor is India’s absence likely to change. An Australian-backed proposal for Indian membership in APEC⁷⁷ – a constitutionally-voluntary dialogue body for economic policy – has yet to gain traction. India’s sudden departure from RCEP in 2019 augurs poorly for future efforts.

The organisational features of these bodies also shape the scope for collaboration. The EAS and G20 are both summit bodies: an annual leaders’ meeting, dedicated to discussion of key issue of the day. While there is some continuity in their agendas⁷⁸, they lack the organisational infrastructure – such as a secretariat, inter-sessional groups or standing work programs – that characterise more formalised international institutions. Their resolutions – codified in communiqués – are aspirational and strictly non-binding. As leaders’ summits, they provide an important venue for governments to endorse agreed policy principles, but much of the negotiation to develop those principles is done elsewhere. Summitry is not an effective platform for the functional, bottom-up type of collaboration envisaged for the AJI coalition, which is better realised through more substantive bodies such as APEC, the OECD or the WTO.



Table 2 Membership in major international and regional institutions

	Japan	Australia	India
Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC)	●	●	
ASEAN Plus Three	●		
ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)	●	●	●
Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP)	●	●	
East Asia Summit (EAS)	●	●	●
Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)		●	●
International Energy Agency (IEA)	●	●	
Group of 20 (G20)	●	●	●
Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)	●	●	
Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)	●	●	

Note: Japan is a dialogue partner, but not full member, of the Indian Ocean Rim Association.



The art of the possible for future trilateral cooperation





The AJI coalition now finds itself at a critical juncture in its development. Since first emerging in response to the collapse of the first incarnation of the Quad, the three governments have made cautious but steady strides towards building mechanisms for collaboration in issues of regional importance. A shared regional outlook on the Indo-Pacific has underpinned the establishment of cooperative initiatives across the security, economic and diplomatic spaces. The governments now have in place the diplomatic infrastructure required to function as a coordinated coalition in regional politics. As geopolitical contestation within the Indo-Pacific grows stronger, the demand for coordination amongst the AJI group will grow in coming years.

But alongside these successes, there have also been missed opportunities. Defence cooperation remains fairly embryonic despite a decade of efforts, and is presently limited to bilateral exchanges at the ministerial and exercise levels. Economic cooperation has faced headwinds, and India's recent withdrawal from RCEP raises questions regarding what the future economic direction of the group should be. The Australia-India relationship is also weaker than the other dyads, meaning the coalition has been dependent on Japan performing a 'fulcrum' function. There is also an issue of how the revitalised Quad mechanism will feature in their relationship, given increasing US-China tensions and questions over US commitment to the region.

Importantly, it must also be remembered that a *shared outlook* does not necessarily imply *overlapping interests*. While the three governments do share a commitment to issues such as economic integration and freedom of maritime navigation, their specific objectives in these domains, and the means by which they seek to achieve them, differ considerably. This imposes constraints upon what the AJI coalition can be reasonably expected to achieve. Many initiatives have foundered because alignment at the level of general principles was insufficient to address the specific needs of one or more of the group.

What, therefore, is the art of the possible for the future of the AJI coalition?

It is clear that doing 'more of the same' is unlikely to deliver on the governments' ambitions. Much of the low-hanging fruit – particularly in terms of establishing bilateral dialogue mechanisms – is already in place. And issue areas that have struggled (such as RCEP in trade, or Malabar for defence exercises) require a strategic reset towards new initiatives that are better fit with the interests of all three members. Rather, what is needed is the development of functional cooperation programs in areas where the governments share both *outlook* and *interests*. This will ensure efforts are channelled towards domains in which there is greatest scope for meaningful outcomes.



The exact areas upon which the AJI coalition should focus will necessarily be fluid, and need to adapt to opportunities and concerns as they arise. The suddenly emerging COVID-19 crisis provides an instructive example, as it has opened possibilities for cooperation in the public health sphere that would not have been viewed as a high priority until very recently. It is therefore beyond the scope of this study to provide a detailed mapping of specific areas for AJI cooperation, as these are likely to change rapidly in the evolving post-COVID environment. There are, however, five broad principles that should inform the direction of these efforts:

- 1. Formal ‘treaty-type’ instruments amongst the AJI coalition are not presently suited to their shared agenda.** This is due to India’s commitment to strategic autonomy, Australia and Japan’s need to integrate with their US relations, and shared concerns over presenting the group as an ‘anti-China’ bloc. Informal mechanisms – such as dialogues and technical cooperation platforms – are better calibrated to the diplomatic constraints facing the three countries.
- 2. Given that there are many instances in which two of the three countries share interests, cultivating bilateral cooperation should be the initial focus.** This can keep in view the potential to expand bilateral initiatives into trilateral efforts when opportunities arise.
- 3. Economic cooperation will need to be functionally-oriented, to accommodate the different trade outlook of India vis-à-vis Australia and Japan.** Greater awareness of domestic priorities and political constraints in all three countries will help to avoid expending energy on initiatives that are likely to encounter sensitivities.
- 4. Security cooperation will need to tread a fine line between responses by the US and Chinese governments.** It will be constrained by Australia and Japan’s commitment to the US alliance; India’s prioritisation of strategic autonomy; and the three countries’ different forms of economic dependencies with China. These factors will shape security policy for the foreseeable future, and cooperative initiatives will need to be designed with these in mind.
- 5. Coalitional advocacy should focus on building consensus around norms and principles with a wider range of partners.** The G20 is the highest impact amongst these, and provides an opportunity for the AJI coalition to advocate for their shared interests in a global forum. Nonetheless, functional groupings, such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association, offer complementary platforms to advance coalitional advocacy in a less formal way.



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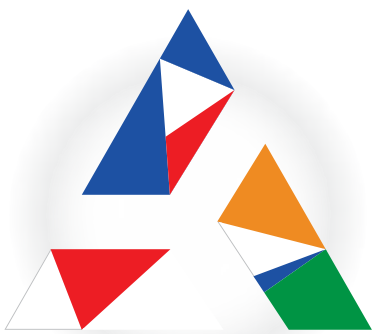
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