

theirview

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## Countering China in the Indo-Pacific

The time has come to proactively further cooperation between India, Japan, the US and Australia to ensure prosperity and stability in the region

Security cooperation between Japan, India, the US and Australia is on the rise. At the recently concluded Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the defence ministers of Japan, the US and Australia reiterated their shared commitment to the Indo-Pacific region. It was closely followed by Japan-India-US Malabar exercises in Guam. Japan, India, the US and Australia will also join Rimpac (Rim of the Pacific) exercises commencing on 27 June. India and the US are planning to hold the first two-plus-two dialogue (between their foreign and defence ministers) in Washington on 6 July.

However, one question remains unanswered: how to turn this Indo-Pacific security cooperation into a “counter China strategy”? There are three possible ways to think about this question.

First, we should focus on the link between Indo-China border area and the East China Sea. If India cooperates with Japan and the US, it will not need to deal with all the Chinese fighter jets at once, because China is likely to keep some of its fighter jets to defend its eastern front. Japan and the US are willing to support India’s efforts to modernize its defence in the Indo-China border area. The US has already exported transport planes (C-17 and C-130), attack helicopters (AH-64), heavy-lift helicopter (CH-47), ultra-light howitzers (M777) and carbines (M4) for Indian forces. Since 2014, Japan has invested in India’s strategic road project in the North-East region.

However, in the event of an India-China crisis, New Delhi will need quick results to dissuade China from advancing. Viewed from this angle, Japan-India-US cooperation at the India-China stand-off at Doklam in 2017 was a good model. Malabar Exercises 2017 happened while the stand-off was going on. China’s concern led its media to suggest that India should not depend on the US and Japan. Later, the Japanese ambassador to India, Kenji Hiramatsu, stated that no side should seek to change the status quo by force. This remark meant unequivocal support for India (and Bhutan).

It is worth keeping in mind that the stand-off ended on 28 August 2017—just before Indian defence minister Arun Jaitley’s visit to Japan on 5-6 September and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s visit to India on 13-15 September. Given this context, it can be surmised that China did not wish to encourage increased Japan-India security ties by continuing the border stand-off. Japan, the US and Australia can use similar measures in a future crisis.

Second, there is a high possibility that in the near future India will be the most influential sea power in the Indian Ocean Region. Japan, the US and Australia will then be able to deploy more military force in the East China Sea and South

China Sea to maintain the military balance against China. Therefore, these three countries should share the know-how related with anti-submarine capabilities and enhance India’s military preparedness. Unsurprisingly, the Japan-India joint statement in September 2017 mentioned cooperation on “anti-submarine aspects”.

Furthermore, developing infrastructure in countries of the region is useful, too. Bangladesh has already chosen Japan’s Martabali port project instead of China’s Sonadia port project. If the Trincomalee port project—involving Japanese assistance—in Sri Lanka succeeds, then the importance of China’s Hambantota port will decline. Similarly, the Chabahar port project in Iran can mitigate the importance of the Chinese Gwadar port in Pakistan. The Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), a result of Indo-Japanese cooperation, will also counter China’s growing influence in Africa.

Third, Japan, India, the US and the Australia can collaborate to support South-East Asian countries in the South China Sea. The South-East Asian countries need to beef up their military power.

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands are strategically important. These islands are near the Malacca Straits, providing an excellent location for tracking China’s submarine activities. India is modernizing infrastructure to deploy more and larger warships and planes in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

In early May, India decided to station fighter jets in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The Indian Navy has deployed two floating docks to repair and refurbish warships. In the same month, Indonesia

gave India access to the Sabang port near the Andaman and Nicobar islands. No detailed official report has been published, but some media reports indicate that Japan, India, and the US are planning to install a submarine-detecting sensor system along the coastline of the Bay of Bengal, including the Andaman and Nicobar islands.

In addition, Japanese investment in India’s strategic road project in the latter’s North-East region will help increase India-South-East Asia trade. There is a possibility that growing India-South-East Asia trade could reduce China’s influence in South-East Asia.

Nowadays, further security cooperation among Japan, India, the US and Australia is increasingly plausible. The time has come to proactively further this cooperation to ensure prosperity and stability in the whole of Indo-Pacific.

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**There is a high possibility that India will soon be the most influential sea power in the Indian Ocean**