Advancing Strategic Asia
by Ambassador Hemant Krishan Singh

The power of a good idea is that its relevance and vitality stand the test of time. The India-Japan-US trilateral dialogue framework, initiated at the Track II level in 2006, is an idea of long-term consequence. Co-chaired by Tarun Das, Yoshiyuki Kasai and Richard Armitage, the ninth meeting of this Track II trilateral dialogue was held in New Delhi on 1-2 March 2012.

Driven primarily by strategic convergences, India’s relations with the US and Japan have made giant strides over the past decade. The Track II trilateral was conceived with great foresight at the high point of India’s strategic engagement with both partners, in order to expand the scope of their cooperation to a broader regional and global dimension. Subsequent developments have only reaffirmed the validity of the trilateral idea, leading to the first Track I meeting being held in Washington D.C. on December 19, 2011 to which a sequel has already been programmed for Tokyo on April 23, 2012.

While each of the three countries are driven by their respective perceptions of national interest, the trilateral has fundamental strengths which help transcend this presumption. American strategists sometimes worry about unresolved issues in the US-Japan security alliance and India’s perceived reticence to step up its regional security role by “acting East”. To put it another way, for the US, Japan may begin to look more like India, while India will never quite look like what Japan used to. Nevertheless, the US is prepared to accommodate its democratic partners precisely because these three countries enjoy shared values, objectives and interests. Not surprisingly, even in the midst of domestic political preoccupations, there is bipartisan support for advancing this three-way partnership in all three capitals.

None of the trilateral partners regard their cooperation as being directed against any other country. Their intention is to promote regional architecture anchored in cooperative frameworks that contribute to regional stability and prosperity in Asia.

Over the past six years, the spatial dimension of trilateral cooperation has evolved. The term “Indo-Pacific”, which has a far more geographically and geo-
strategically inclusive connotation than its “Asia-Pacific” precursor, has become the canvas for crafting a common agenda.

Going by the Asian Development Bank’s “Asian Century” scenario, Asia’s share of global GDP will double to reach over 50% by 2050. Seven countries (China, India, Indonesia, Japan, ROK, Thailand and Malaysia) will account for 91% of Asian GDP growth and 53% of global growth between 2010-2050. Their share of world GDP will rise to 45% by 2050.

This forecast only underscores the importance of the region to the economies of India, Japan and the US. In the years ahead, these three maritime democracies will be called upon to play an ever-increasing role to provide strategic stability to the Indo-Pacific.

Empowering India’s emergence as a major economy is a key component of cooperation among the trilateral countries. There is forward momentum from both the US and Japan. The US is ahead on trade and investment, while Japan has made greater strides in helping build India’s infrastructure. Energy cooperation holds much promise. It remains to be seen whether the India-Japan CEPA will have a matching counterpart in an India-US bilateral investment treaty (BIT) or an even more ambitious EPA.

India-US defence transfers and military exercises are steadily intensifying. More work is needed on the US side to build trust in a reliable partnership and progress from sales transactions to defence technology sharing. To make this possible and derive greater technological benefits, the Indian side should liberalise the defence production sector and move faster to conclude the long-pending agreements envisaged under the 2005 India-US Defence Framework.

Between India and Japan, the mechanisms for defence and security cooperation are in some ways more extensive but await concretisation of outcomes. Hopefully, the forthcoming India-Japan Strategic Dialogue, meeting of Defence Ministers and 2+2 Dialogue will mark progress in advancing security ties.

By relaxing its long-standing arms export guidelines, Japan has taken initial steps towards defence industrial cooperation with India. Its offer of a search and rescue seaplane which can greatly extend the Indian Navy’s reach across the Indian Ocean rim needs to be pursued by both sides. The first India-Japan bilateral naval exercise is to take place this year. Apart from partnering Japan’s MSDF in anti-piracy operations off the Gulf of Aden, the Indian Navy should also try and draw synergies from the MSDF’s Djibouti base.

At the regional level, there is much that the trilateral countries can do together. America’s Asian “pivot” has been largely welcomed as a factor of reassurance for continued regional stability. As India’s defence relations with Japan intensify, the India-Japan strategic partnership can also come to be regarded as a regional public good, much like the US-Japan alliance has been in East Asia for the past five decades.

The coming years will see growing cooperation between the trilateral countries in regional fora, particularly the EAS and ADMM+, on Indo-Pacific maritime security issues. India is well placed to develop Port Blair as a hub for cooperation and capacity building among regional navies for common challenges ranging from maritime security and anti-piracy to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR).

Finally, progressing regional economic integration through the parallel processes of CEPEA (ASEAN+6) and TPP will add another important dimension to trilateral cooperation.

As an “Asian Century” unfolds, the progress of India-Japan-US trilateral cooperation will be measured by its success in sustaining economic interdependence and mitigating strategic competition. Working incrementally, future meetings of the trilateral at the Track I governmental level can build a wider agenda of concrete cooperation across the Indo-Pacific littoral, from East Asia to the shores of Africa. The best from this promising partnership is yet to come.

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