Community Building in Asia?
Trilateral Cooperation in Humanitarian
Assistance and Disaster Relief

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How important is the "community-building" dimension of the Australia-Japan-US trilateral relationship? This basic question is often overshadowed by a wider debate about whether or not the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD) is a containment mechanism developed by the United States, Japan, and Australia to block China's rise. As Zhu Feng argues, "The TSD is in effect an important effort to counterbalance China's rise…without the specter of a rising China, Washington, Tokyo, and Canberra would not have begun intensifying defense cooperation."[1] Indeed, the containment issue has become more pronounced since 2010, as not only Sino-American but also Sino-Japanese relations have become increasingly strained.

Although the question of community building receives less attention, it is nonetheless important. A key aim of the TSD has been to facilitate a "gradual process of Asia-Pacific community building."[2] This purpose matches expectations that traditional bilateral alliance expectations will gradually be replaced by "multilateral groupings united by common rules and norms for regional governance."[3] The United States, Japan, and Australia have often referred to community building, especially with regard to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR), as a core objective of their cooperation. In the TSD's first joint statement in March 2006, they specifically mentioned the aim of "strengthening cooperative frameworks in the Asia-Pacific region."[4] The TSD could therefore provide a useful way to engage the region in the "relatively uncontroversial areas of security cooperation with high prospects for successful interaction," engagement that might prove beneficial, not only for HA/DR purposes, but also for reducing tensions in the region.[5]

Because HA/DR has long been viewed as a promising area for such aims, it provides a useful case for examining the importance of this dimension of the TSD. Early criticism of the TSD was that it was tokenistic, lacked substance, involved little coordination, and was largely focused on the "symbolism of a

trilateral relationship configured around the United States."[6] If subsequent HA/DR developments also match this characterization, the community-building objective must inevitably be viewed as shallow. The record of HA/DR capability development since 2005, however, has been more complex than this picture would indicate, suggesting that the TSD may have become a more substantial institution on the HA/DR front than originally anticipated.

New Challenges, New Commitments

The goal of developing HA/DR policy existed well before the TSD was formally established. In the mid-1990s, as the United States began revising its alliance relationships with Australia and Japan, key changes were made to the types of activities considered to be within the scope of these relationships. In 1996, the United States and Japan agreed that they would further develop bilateral cooperation at both regional and global levels, and HA/DR was also emphasized in the subsequent Japan-U.S. Joint Declaration on Security.[7] This declaration expressed the two countries' commitment to cooperate in UN peacekeeping operations (PKO) and international humanitarian relief operations, including "transportation, medical services, information sharing, and education and training." The two countries also committed to conducting "emergency relief operations in response to requests from governments concerned or international organizations in the wake of large-scale disasters."[8]

Similarly, at ministerial consultations in 1998, the United States and Australia emphasized "increased humanitarian assistance" when discussing turmoil in Indonesia. They also urged restraint and the need for a "lasting solution" for the problems in East Timor.[9] Indeed, the 1999 Timor-Leste crisis played an important role in deepening Australia's approach to HA/DR. In subsequent years, Australia and Japan (notwithstanding some initial disagreements) contributed significant resources to the international forces deployed to Timor-Leste, while the United States provided indirect support.[10] Tomohiko Satake argues that cooperation over Timor-Leste demonstrated a desire to broaden bilateral cooperation as a way to provide security for the wider region.[11] Soon after Japan became involved on the ground in Timor-Leste, Australia and Japan signed a Memorandum of Understanding over defense exchanges, from "high level" exchanges to "a range of working level contacts."[12]

However, the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami has had the most significant impact on the TSD's approach toward disaster relief. According to Stacy White, the tragedy was of such an "unprecedented scope" that it led to a "transformative shift" in how the region "thought about risk."[13] It contributed to various new HA/

DR initiatives, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response, as well as a "Tsunami Core Group" (United States, Japan, Australia, and India), described at the time as "a new style of diplomacy."[14] Further, it prompted the United States, Japan, and Australia to establish what would become a more robust and durable structure for cooperation on non-traditional security issues.[15]

According to Malcolm Cook, with regard to Japan and Australia in particular, HA/DR cooperation in response to the Indian Ocean tsunami has "helped broaden and deepen" a network of officials who are committed to furthering relations between the two countries and have worked to promote wider cooperation, including joint training and logistics.[16] Japan-Australia bilateral cooperation also emerged from the two countries' participation in reconstruction work in Samawa, in Iraq's Al Muthanna province. Between 2005 and 2006, Australia dispatched forces to Samawa specifically to protect Japanese forces (in light of the tight legal restraints under which they were operating) and also to help train Iraqi forces.[17]

Formalizing Trilateral Cooperation

By May 2005, when upgrading the official level of dialogue at the TSD was proposed, the TSD members had accumulated a range of experience in HA/DR cooperation. Nonetheless, HA/DR did not attract a great deal of attention at the first TSD ministerial meeting in March 2006, even as other non-traditional security challenges were discussed.[18] However, the three nations continued to develop joint approaches to HA/DR in their bilateral relationships. At the Australia-US Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) in November 2005, for instance, the United States and Australia agreed that "peace operations capacity, including humanitarian and disaster relief, is a critical component of Asia-Pacific and global security."[19]

This process has continued since 2007. In March of that year, when Japan and Australia signed the Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation (JDSC), they included "peace operations" and "humanitarian relief operations, including disaster relief" among the key areas of cooperation. They also committed to conducting training and exercises to "further increase effectiveness of cooperation" in these areas. Likewise, under the 2007 Enhanced Defence Cooperation Initiative, the United States and Australia undertook to "develop a combined humanitarian assistance and disaster relief capability to enhance [their] joint responses to catastrophic regional events." Later, at the February 2008 AUSMIN, the United States and Australia recommitted to this

decision and to further cooperation on HA/DR by agreeing to establish joint HA/DR capabilities through which they would "enhance their ability to respond to contingencies in the region."[20]

Beginning in 2008, the three governments began to insert more detail into building HA/DR cooperation at the trilateral level. At the third TSD ministerial meeting, held in Kyoto in June of that year, they agreed to strengthen cooperation across a number of key areas, particularly HA/DR. Attached to this joint statement was an annex on trilateral cooperation, which included a commitment to build on the TSD members' earlier record of HA/DR cooperation, notably in response to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. A decision was also made to establish a technical-level review for discussing areas for practical cooperation and information sharing. Joint exercises would also be conducted in order to "build understanding of respective emergency response procedures and capabilities."[21] Technical discussions took place in late 2008 in Australia, with officials meeting to discuss setting up guidelines to coordinate the TSD activities on HA/DR. In the Action Plan for the JDSC, announced in December 2009, Japan and Australia agreed to work more closely on "disaster response and risk reduction."[22]

Thereafter, HA/DR became more firmly entrenched in trilateral coordination, in both policy and practice. HA/DR activities conducted by the TSD members included responses to several disasters, such as the September 2009 Sumatra earthquake in Indonesia and July 2010 floods in Pakistan (conducted alongside Indonesia and China). Personnel, airlift, and medical support were provided in response to these disasters.[23] On the training front, the three countries also increased their joint exercises between 2007 and 2010. For example, in October 2007 and September 2009, the Japan Maritime SDF, the US Navy, and the Royal Australian Air Force carried out trilateral exercises involving P-3C patrol aircraft.[24]

Other policies aimed at increasing cooperation were also developed during this period. In March 2010, the Japanese and Australian governments signed the Japan-Australia Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA). Although the agreement did not commence until 2013, it was intended to "promote more efficient performance" between the two countries' defense forces, via UN PKO and "humanitarian international relief operations."[25] The desire to "strengthen bilateral cooperation in PKO, HA/DR, and other areas of international security operations," as Yusuke Ishihara highlights, was a major driver of the agreement, as opposed to "direct cooperation on the national defense of the two countries."[26]

Crisis, Complexity, and Coordination

Notwithstanding these developments, however, the major test of HA/DR came with the Great East Japan earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster of March 2011. The two most substantial providers of HA/DR in response to the crisis in the Tōhoku region of Japan were the United States and Australia, with the United States providing the majority of support as part of Operation Tomodachi (lit. "Operation Friend"). The United States provided assistance that included 24 naval ships, nearly 190 aircraft, and about 24,000 personnel.[27] Australia's contribution as part of Operation Pacific Assist focused on the provision of C-17 aircraft to transport search-and-rescue units, supplies, and SDF units (totaling more than 450 tons). The C-17 aircraft made thirty-one landings at different airfields in Japan during the twelve days of operations.[28]

The Tōhoku tragedy has had a substantial impact on policymakers' understanding of HA/DR. Suzanne Basalla et al. describe the response as an "unprecedented whole-of-government effort by both Japan and the United States."[29] However, this approach revealed a number of policy weaknesses, especially in terms of managing information flows between multiple agencies. Unlike regular US-Japan cooperation, largely conducted between the relevant defense agencies and forces, HA/DR during the Tōhoku disaster expanded the range of actors involved in the bilateral relationship, thereby creating significant coordination difficulties. As Nozumu Yoshitomi explains, the lack of a robust framework meant that cooperation could only be achieved through temporary solutions.[30] The communication challenges in the period initially after the disaster were particularly problematic. Further HA/DR policy development and practice were needed.[31]

The post-Tōhoku policy response has indeed followed this path. At the fourth Australia-Japan Foreign and Defence Ministerial Consultations, held in Sydney in September 2012, Japan and Australia committed to strengthening "bilateral and regional cooperation on disaster management." This included improving coordination across both civilian and military dimensions, as well as with "disaster preparedness and response."[32] More has also been achieved in the area of joint training and mission preparedness. Indeed, the increase in such activities, according to Anthony Bergin, has likely created "fatigue in military and civilian circles from the burgeoning HA/DR exercise and 'conference industry.'"[33] In Exercise Talisman Sabre in 2013, Australia and the United States sought to improve interoperability across a range of scenarios. Civilian agency involvement, so as to improve whole-of-government planning, was a key part of these exercises, with representatives from various international and non-governmental organizations participating.[34] Australia also joined Japan and

the United States at the exercise Michi'noku Alert, held in November 2014 in the Sendai region of Japan. The exercise enabled the TSD members to improve cooperation in an earthquake disaster scenario.[35]

Trilateral cooperation has also broadened to include wider multilateral bodies. The biennial Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) military exercises already provide one such forum for HA/DR training. In July 2014, the United States, Japan, and Australia, along with nineteen other nations, participated in the exercises, which were designed to develop better cooperation in HA/DR between civilian and military organizations.[36] The TSD members have also played a role in developing HA/DR cooperation through the UN. Since 2002, Japan has led the UN Multinational Cooperation Program in the Asia-Pacific conference to study the coordination of multilateral HA/DR policy in the region.[37] Another well-established example of low-key multilateral cooperation incorporating the TSD members, but also encompassing other regional players, is the US Pacific Partnership mission to the Asia-Pacific region, conducted since 2006. As part of the US' ninth mission, conducted around Southeast Asia in 2014, a Japan Maritime SDF ship acted for the first time as the mission's primary platform.[38]

Conclusion

As rivalries grow in the Asia-Pacific region, so the containment issue continues to overshadow the HA/DR and community-building components of the TSD. Indeed, it may be that strategic motivations have heavily shaped the TSD members' thinking toward HA/DR. The analysis presented here does not address questions of wider motivations, although this issue has been examined elsewhere. Athol Yates and Bergin, for example, identify a number of non-humanitarian motives for such activities, including reinforcing established alliances, promoting national security interests, and developing interoperability.[39] Accordingly, suspicions about the alliance utility of any such activities persist; containment and community-building objectives are not, after all, mutually exclusive.

However, as the above analysis shows, the development of HA/DR capabilities by the United States, Japan, and Australia since 2005 has been significant. This suggests a more complex reality than was perhaps initially anticipated, as HA/DR now has a substantial history as part of the TSD. Some of this history, it should be noted, has confirmed early skepticism: much HA/DR work has been aspirational rather than concrete, conducted at the bilateral rather than fully trilateral level, and limited to grandiose formal communiqués. Yet this is clearly not the whole story. As the TSD has evolved, tokenism has gradually been replaced with a range of sophisticated HA/DR capability-building activities.

A key example of the level of progress has been the recent attention given to whole-of-government challenges in coordinating HA/DR. The increased focus on these challenges, especially after the Tōhoku disaster in 2011, highlights this shift in HA/DR policymaking: from generalities to more complex questions of interagency coordination. Intermittent external shocks in the form of major disasters across the Asia-Pacific region — the 2004 Indian Ocean disaster and the 2011 Tōhoku disaster, in particular — have acted as crucial catalysts behind this shift. This indicates that HA/DR has been driven not only by motivations on the part of the TSD members to improve "habits of cooperation," but also by the growing demand for multilateral HA/DR across the Asia-Pacific region.

Given the rapidly changing regional order, doubts about whether the TSD has been intended as a mechanism to contain China are likely to linger or even worsen. Yet as this chapter demonstrates, the TSD is not just a feature of the Asia-Pacific region's more contested geopolitics; it has, in fact, established itself as an important institution for HA/DR cooperation across the region. Indeed, such "community-building" efforts — precisely because they offer strong prospects for engaging China — are likely to grow more important in the coming years.

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