



Asia Pacific Bulletin

UK-Japan Cooperation in Preserving the Liberal Order

BY JOHN HEMMINGS

While much has been written on the apparent diminishment of the liberal global order, and on the rise of Chinese and Russian revisionism in Ukraine and the South China Sea, comparatively little has been written about how liberal democracies around the world have responded to these mini-attacks on the international system. One of the most prominent and interesting trends has been in the security realm, where new “virtual” and “quasi-alliances”, trilaterals, and quadrilaterals have sprung up between states with previously-weak security ties. While few of these relationship can be defined as actual alliances – they lack mutual defense commitments after all – they have many “alliance-like” features, including cooperation in sensitive intelligence and defense sectors. Australian scholar, William Tow, calls them a “unique theoretical challenge” for international relations theorists since they do not accord with our traditional understanding of what constitutes an alliance.

The foreign and defense ministerial (2+2) meeting between Japan and the United Kingdom is one such grouping, and shares a number of common features with its counterparts in the Indo-Pacific region. The first of these is the evolving nature of security cooperation, with London and Tokyo developing ever-closer levels of strategic dialogue and interoperability. A second feature is that both countries are in formal alliances with the United States, and these dyads lead to trilateralism with Washington across a range of sectors. However, one key difference between the UK-Japan, UK-Japan-US, US-Japan-Australia trilateral, and US-Japan-India-Australia Quadrilateral, are that the latter two are both centered in and around the Indo-Pacific region. It is therefore, worth examining the strategic rationales for the UK-Japan bilateral as well as the UK-Japan-US trilateral, while also discussing challenges to future cooperation.

So, what exactly are the strategic rationales and challenges for closer UK-Japan and UK-Japan-US security cooperation? As has already been mentioned, the driver for much of this is the insecurity created by Russian and Chinese challenges to the traditional rules-based order. Beijing’s military takeover of the South China Sea – a major global trade route connecting Europe and Asia accounting for 12% of total British trade and 19% of total Japanese trade – has promoted strategic discussions between Britain and Japan. The Joint Statement of the 3rd UK-Japan 2+2 explicitly raises concerns over the South China Sea as well as a commitment to a “rules-based order in the maritime domain based on the principles of international law, as set out in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and to the peaceful settlement of maritime disputes through diplomatic and legal means.” Such messaging is an important component of showing the resolve of states, and could potentially check or at least slow future Chinese expansion.

Another strategic rationale for both nations is to relieve some of the pressure on their defense industries. Given defense budgets must deal with ever-increasing defense inflation and rising research and development costs, cooperative ventures are touted as cost-saving. They can also exploit pooled technologies. A UK-Japan study on a new Joint New Air-to-Air Missile (JNAAM) Phase 2, promises to put a Japanese engine in British Meteor missiles, creating what some experts predict will be the best missile in allied inventories. There is also ongoing research in chemical and biological protection technology, and there could also be further cooperation in amphibious capability, giving UK forces – slated for cuts – an urgently needed lifeline. Then there is cyber security cooperation that becomes more urgent as each year

John Hemmings, Director of the Asia Studies Centre at The Henry Jackson Society in London, asks “Will [these relationships] actually deter would-be aggressors when all is said and done?”

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passes, as advances in technologies like artificial intelligence create new emerging threats to national infrastructure and national economies.

Finally, there is the ability for closer UK-Japanese cooperation to pave the way to trilateralism with the US, creating a healthy synergy between three liberal democracies vested in the current global order. There is a sort of geostrategic logic to this, with all three sharing intelligence about their respective hemispheres. There are also other drivers. The United States and the UK are part of the Five Eyes intelligence group, and can help shape Japan’s ongoing quest to develop a strong intelligence community institutionalizing cooperation and socializing Japan’s intelligence agencies in Five Eye’s standards of intelligence-sharing, operations, and classification. The three also rely on the maritime global commons for trade. The signing of a trilateral naval agreement in November 2016 indicates increasing attempts to control such spaces, and a willingness for the three to resist such efforts.

Despite the apparent strength of these various drivers toward cooperation, sceptics of the budding UK-Japan bilateral point to the disparate set of security goals and the geographical challenges. London and Tokyo differ, for example, in how they regard Russia and China. Post-Brexit Britain, for example, still views China as an important trade partner, and Russia as its most pressing security issue. Tokyo, in nearly perfect contrast, views Russia as a diplomatic opportunity, and China as its most pressing security challenge. Other naysayers point to the scarcity of resources that each can commit to the other’s region. The visit of four British Eurofighters to take part in the Guardian North 16 exercise in Japan seemed underwhelming, while Japan – for its part – has tended to view the relationship as a means of bring Britain to Asia rather than helping to contribute more to Britain’s own regional security. For those policymakers at the forefront of such debates, justifying the time and resource expenditure seems to push bureaucracies toward short-term, “low-hanging fruit” objectives, but states must start somewhere, and these relationships allow for incremental evolution.

Perhaps the largest challenge to future UK-Japan-US trilateralism is a lack of sustained interest in Washington. Part of this is geostrategic – American policymakers are yet to grasp the benefits of such a partnership – and part of it is bureaucratic. It may sound simplistic, but the co-location of regional desks in the Pentagon and State Department made Indo-Pacific trilaterals (under PACOM leadership) much less troublesome than a trilateral that stretches across two different regions and unified combatant commands. The original trilateral – the US-ROK-Japan variant – was relatively easy to do since DOD desk officers who worked on Japan and Korea shared an office. Similarly, Washington think tanks tend to frame research by sector or geographic region. So few of the influential think tanks that currently research trilateralism (like CSIS, Brookings, and AEI) have researchers with a background in both UK and Japanese security policy. It is a larger leap than Japan-India security policy.

Despite these challenges, it is clear that US-Japan-UK and UK-Japan security cooperation will continue to be a growth business. This is primarily because the international system is going through a deeply unstable period, and insecure states naturally seek out allies and partners to help alleviate their insecurity. As long as Russia and China continue to use salami-slicing tactics and the threat of military force to break down the liberal rules-based order, democratic allies of the United States like Britain and Japan will continue to develop these loose security ties. The real question is whether such relationships are sufficient. Will they actually deter would-be aggressors when all is said and done? It is a truism of modern history that alliances caused the First World War. In actual fact, we know that Great Britain remained uncommitted to its Triple Entente partners, France and Russia, in 1914 and to France, again, in 1939. In both cases, London was compelled to go to war despite its wishes. It all depends on the level of commitment and the level of messaging that status quo powers are willing to commit. The more committed the UK and Japan are, the stronger the message.

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