

Trilateral Convergence: SAGE International's case for a security compact between the UK, Australia, and Japan (UKAJ)

Dr. John Bruni, Prof. Emeritus Purnendra Jain, CDRE Patrick J. Tyrrell OBE RN (Ret'd), David James Olney & Simon Chelton

Introduction

This article is the latest iteration of a series of open-source articles written by SAGE International in 2020.¹ The concept of a minilateral security compact between the UK, Australia and Japan was also incorporated within SAGE International's report, funded by the Australian Department of Defence (2019-20),² on the Indo-Pacific. The idea originated from an impromptu meeting in Tokyo in 2019 between Dr. John Bruni and some British defence and defence industry officials over coffee where they were discussing ways to better develop bilateral defence industry ties between Britain and Japan. John, being Australian, recognised that Australia should be brought into the mix considering that all three countries are among the strongest security allies of the United States, all three countries are islands (and highly dependent on the sea for trade and commerce), all three countries operate American military technology and finally all three countries have natural complementarities. For instance, the UK is one of the world's most important financial centres, Australia is one of the world's most important commodity powers and Japan is one of the world's leading centres for technology and industry. Furthermore, they support a rules-based international order and believe in democratic values. Independently they are each in their own way important to the global economy, however they are limited in what they can do for themselves from a security perspective. All three countries being 'middle powers' in a world where major tensions exist between the world's two largest powers, the United States and China; all three are outward looking, have constitutions based on the Rule of Law and eschew bullying and authoritarian behaviours. Their relatively smaller size means that they do not have the necessary resources to be front rank world powers and all three have caps on their respective defence spending. While they may be able to conduct stout defence of their respective territories, and some of their overseas interests, none are strong enough, large enough or capable enough of exercising decisive force as independent states without the involvement of the United States, the most militarily and economically dominant country in the world. In the case of Japan, Article 9 of its constitution prevents it from taking anything but a low-key and highly defensive approach to its national defence. There was a crisis of confidence all American allies encountered under the former Trump administration (2016-20) and a long-term, major bone of contention continues to be a strong case that US allies should do more to share the burden of preserving a free and open Indo-Pacific. In order to address these issues, the team at SAGE International set about trying to formulate a trilateral concept between the UK, Australia and Japan which would enable these countries to pool their

¹ Jain P, Bruni J & Tyrrell P, 'Japan, Australia and Britain Should Forge Closer Security Ties in a Fast-Changing World', *The Japan News*, February 23, 2020, p.7; Bruni J, Jain P & Tyrrell P, 'A New Strategic Trilateral of the UK, Australia and Japan?', *The Naval Review*, Vol.108, No. 4, 2020, pp.362-368; Bruni J, Jain P & Tyrrell P, 'Why Australia, the UK and Japan Need Closer Security Cooperation', Strategic Concept Paper, [SAGE International Australia](#), August 12, 2020 (republished in [Defence Connect](#))

² Bruni J, Olney D, Jain P, Ludwig J & Tyrrell P, The strategic implications of changing dynamics & regional partnerships on major power competition in the Indo-Pacific, *SAGE International Australia*, Ovato Press, Victoria, 2020, pp.17-18.

resources and co-ordinate their efforts in a way that would benefit them collectively as well as benefit the preservation of the contemporary US-led international order. The following article outlines how practical trilateral cooperation may come about.

Tying the Threads Together



Figure 1 HMS Queen Elizabeth conducting her first F-35B landing. Image credit, Shutterstock

In February 2021, after a meeting with their Japanese counterparts, British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab and Defence Secretary Ben Wallace confirmed that the Royal Navy's aircraft carrier, HMS Queen Elizabeth, was to deploy 'East of Suez'. At the time of writing in late May 2021 the Royal Navy's UK-led multinational Carrier Strike Group 21 (CSG21), consisting of the HMS Queen Elizabeth, six supporting surface ships including one American and one Dutch destroyer, and a submarine have departed British waters on its way into the Indo-Pacific region. In a show of close and enduring bilateral relations between the UK and the United States, the British carrier will embark 5 UK and 10 US Marine Corps F-35Bs. Its mission – to conduct exercises with the Indian, Singaporean, South Korean and Japanese navies. Flying the Royal Navy flag in this way is hugely symbolic for post-Brexit London, demonstrating a global British power projection capability independent from its ongoing commitments to NATO and the defence of Continental Europe while also recognising the increasing global importance of the Indo-Pacific region. Defence Secretary Wallace said CSG21 represents:

[t]he most significant Royal Navy deployment in a generation [which] demonstrates the UK's commitment to working with our partners in the region to uphold the rules-based international system and promote our shared security and prosperity.

Other defence agreements between the United Kingdom and Japan have been developed over the last few years, including a 2013 agreement in equipment cooperation. Newer developments propose systems level cooperation in future fighter programmes and joint development of an air-to-air missile.

For Japan, this form of military cooperation with the UK compliments its treaty relationship with the United States and demonstrates broader engagement.³ Rather than being seen as a move to replace the US as a primary security partner, the addition of Britain to Japan's security equation complements the existing US presence in Japan by adding another US-aligned state to Japan's existing security framework, limited as it is by Article 9 of its post-World War II constitution which under current interpretation "[*renounces war and prohibits Japan from maintaining the war potential.*](#)" Furthermore, British-Japanese military exercises at a time of heightened tension with the People's Republic of China provide Japan with a partner that is equally committed to upholding the rule of international law in disputed areas such as the South China Sea. Japan also desires to be a member of the Five-eyes (FVEY) group. In a recent article in *The Times*, Japan's newly installed Ambassador to Australia, Shingo Yamagami, the former head of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs intelligence branch was cited that 'Japan is preparing to join the Anglophone world's Five Eyes intelligence-sharing network' and "[w]e would like to see this idea become reality in the near future."⁴ Should the FVEY group add Japan in a 'FVEY-plus' arrangement this would make Japan one of the world's foremost and trusted intelligence gathering countries alongside the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, adding an extra layer of internal strategic coherence to the UKAJ construct.

For the UK, Brexit has fundamentally altered its place in Europe. While still a key member of NATO forces dedicated to the security of the European continent, Britain, as an island trading nation foreswore full integration within the EU in favour of a return to its pre-EU status as a 'Britain of the Seas', harking back to when Britain's global empire was founded and maintained by the most powerful navy in the world – the Royal Navy. And while London might never possess a fleet as powerful and as far reaching as the one which forged itself as the centre of a globe-spanning empire, putting significant distance between itself and Brussels has meant that, moving forward, London will have to develop its own indigenous capacities in four key domains – maritime, air, cyber and outer space. It will only be by accomplishing this hard and expensive task that London will be able to exercise its newfound sovereign interests globally in tandem with both the United States as well as with other potential partner countries such as Japan and Australia. The UK's application to join the CPTPP (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership) should be seen as part of a strategic shift in this direction.

Since the signing of the 1951 ANZUS Treaty, Australia has made this the bedrock of its security against external threats although the treaty itself does not have a clause in it that automatically pledges US support to Australia should the country ever be threatened. But, as we discovered during Australia's leadership of the International Force East Timor (INTERFET) (1999-2000) mission, US assistance can come in many forms. American

³ Because Japan's only ally is the United States and because of Japan's essentially defensive posture, the US remains primarily responsible for the defence of the Japanese islands

⁴ Lagan B., Japan prepares to join UK, US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand in Five Eyes intelligence-sharing network, *The Times*, April 21, 2021.

diplomacy⁵ as well as the deployment of seven US Navy warships and several transport aircraft⁶ signalled the Clinton administration's support for INTERFET and that Washington would not broach deliberate Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI) escalation of the crisis such as a direct attack on international forces in East Timor or on supporting Australian Defence Force (ADF) assets. Many critics of ANZUS and of the Australia-US relationship pointed to the Clinton administration's 'weak' response to the Howard government's request for US assistance.⁷ However, as Professor Emeritus Hugh White⁸ argued, the US did not want to contribute 'boots on the ground'. During the mid-late 1990s, America's commitment to the air war over the Balkans⁹ as well as maintaining Iraq's post 1991 Gulf War no-fly zones¹⁰ led to worries in the Pentagon about the US military's high tempo of operations.¹¹ Furthermore, Australia only required assistance in terms of airlift.¹² What is never acknowledged is that had the US done nothing at all and just let the crisis play out, INTERFET may have escalated into an all-out Australian-Indonesian war with long-term consequences for both countries' bilateral relations as well as for bilateral relations between the US and Australia. However, as the 2000s progressed, Australian security began to diversify in subtle but significant ways.

Recognising the importance of a stable Northeast Asia and Japan's central role in acting as a key plank in regional great power stability, the Australian government reached out to Tokyo to forge bilateral security ties. Initially through the 2001 Trilateral Security Dialogue (later, the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue) which involved the United States.¹³ After all, both countries are key American allies in the Pacific, effectively operating very similar types of military technology – many derived from American capabilities. Japan and Australia are significant trading partners and saw the world from similar perspectives. As a consequence of the quiet diplomacy through the aforementioned Trilateral Strategic Dialogue, a bilateral Japanese-Australian security dialogue was founded in 2007, the Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation.

In 2015, in what would have been a radical shift towards a closer Japan-Australia security alignment, Tokyo offered a submarine design to Australia for the country's Collins class replacement program, the Competitive Evaluation Process (CEP). Then Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott's public insistence that all or some of the Japanese boats would be

⁵ At an American and Asian Business Leaders meeting in Auckland, NZ, September 12, 1999 US President Clinton said: "*The United States has suspended all military cooperation, assistance, and sales to Indonesia. I have made clear that my willingness to support future economic assistance from the international community will depend upon how Indonesia handles the situation from today forward. We are carefully reviewing all our own economic and commercial programs there. The present course of action is imperilling Indonesia's future, as well as that of the individual East Timorese.*" [Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: WILLIAM J. CLINTON](#) (1999, Book II) [September 12, 1999] [Pages 1521-1526] [From the U.S. Government Publishing Office www.gpo.gov]

⁶ [International Force East Timor](#), Military, wikia.org

⁷ Brennan E.C., '[So Much for the ANZUS Treaty](#)': [The East Timor crisis and treaty considerations](#), *My Life and Rhymes*, 26/07/16

⁸ A long-time Australian defence and intelligence analyst, commentator and author

⁹ Including the bombing of Bosnia-Herzegovina 1995 and the 1999 bombing of Kosovo

¹⁰ Maintaining the northern and southern no-fly zones over Iraq 1991-2003 and the four-day bombing campaign known as Operation Desert Fox in 1998 proved taxing for American global airpower commitments

¹¹ While America's air campaigns in the Yugoslav and Iraqi theatres did not involve the use of ground forces, significant US ground forces were nonetheless tied up in case they needed to be used.

¹² White H., [The Road to INTERFET: Reflections on Australian Strategic Decisions Concerning East Timor](#), December 1998-September 1999, *Security Challenges*, Autumn 2008, Vol.4, No.1, p.83.

¹³ Tow, W.T., [The Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation and Asia-Pacific Strategic Geometries](#), *Nautilus Institute*, September 6, 2007

completed in Japanese shipyards, which would have effectively destroyed the Australian Submarine Corporation's (ASC's) indigenous capability for building submarines in Australia, led to a competition for which Japan was not prepared, never previously having sold defence equipment overseas. The bid was won by French firm DCNS, now Naval Group. It is perfectly possible that Japan would have agreed to build all the boats in Australia, as was acknowledged by former Maritime Self-Defense Fleet commander Admiral Yoji Koda at the Sub Summit 2015 (March 24-26), hosted by the Royal United Services Institute of Australia (RUSI-A) and SAGE International.¹⁴ But despite the loss of this AUD 50-billion contract that would have been Japan's first sale of a complex weapon system to another country, the desire for closer relations between Australia and Japan was not dampened.

Since then, the two countries have become strategically far closer. JSDF and ADF units have conducted joint exercises, for example, in July 2020; five RAN ships joined Japanese and American warships in the Philippine Sea for training exercises; while later that year, in November, the Suga and Morrison governments signed an agreement facilitating joint military exercises. As stated in Nikkei Asia:

A pact to facilitate joint military exercises will ease restrictions on the Japan Self-Defense Forces as well as on Australian military personnel while they are staying in each other's country for such drills.¹⁵

On the other side of the ledger is of course Australia's relationship with the United Kingdom. As Australia is a former British Dominion, there are deep historical and cultural ties to the UK. The fact that Australia is still a constitutional monarchy, recognising Queen Elizabeth II as the country's sovereign through the office of Australia's Governor General is an inescapable fact of contemporary Australian politics wherever one's sympathies lie regarding this situation.

From a defence perspective, much of Australia's military forces were modelled on Britain's and had experience in fighting alongside British forces during World Wars I & II and some of the post-war conflicts that beset Northeast and Southeast Asia during the early part of the Cold War.¹⁶ The ADF Services maintain their 'Royal' prefixes and presumably will maintain this until such a time as the country adopts an entirely republican political nomenclature. BAE Systems,¹⁷ although headquartered in the UK and with a substantial presence in the US, is one of Australia's leading prime defence corporates in the nation's defence industry working on several non-British and non-American defence designs that were brought into the Australian order of battle. And recently, the Australian government ordered nine British-designed Hunter-class frigates (est. AUD 35 billion), to be built by BAE Systems replacing the country's eight German designed ANZAC-class frigates that have been in service with the Royal Australian Navy since 1996. That these frigates will be like those operated by units of the Royal Navy, potentially deployed into the Indo-Pacific either on exercise with Australian or Japanese forces increases the RAN's interoperability with the RN. Australia and Britain are both part of the Five Eyes global intelligence sharing network and finally, the recent signing (February 2021) of the UK-Australia Space Bridge Framework Agreement

¹⁴ (eds.) Starick P & James C., [The Submarine Dossier](#), *The Advertiser*, March 24, 2015

¹⁵ Mizorogi T., [Japan and Australia to ink joint-drill pact in Indo-Pacific push](#), *Nikkei Asia*, November 13, 2020

¹⁶ And fought alongside British forces during the Korean War 1950-53

¹⁷ The name was created from a merger with Marconi Electronic Systems in 1999. The BA came from British Aerospace and E Systems from Marconi.

between the UK Space Agency and the Australian Space Agency is yet another sign of closer British-Australian strategic collaboration.

Why UKAJ?



Figure 2 HMAS Canberra. One of two flat tops serving in the Royal Australian Navy. Image credit, Shutterstock

The UK is looking to have a new global role but will be constrained by economic and political realities. The new Britain, independent from the EU, cannot and will not reinvent the former British Empire in any form. But London can extend cooperative and collaborative agreements to select countries which possess similar historical, cultural, and strategic objectives. The problem here is to align its objectives with a small set of such states with which it has pre-existing relationships. This way, the difficulty of managing inter-state and inter-governmental expectations can be reduced to the benefit of all.

Japan is slowly expanding the scope of JSDF deployments and activities, but there is little appetite in Tokyo for Japan to act unilaterally. A reawakened Japanese military would cause great concern to other Asian states, no doubt led by the People's Republic of China, unless embedded within a security framework that can allow Japan to extend its reach with others.

Australia, while content with the strategic status quo, was shaken by the Trump years and the disruption of the American security umbrella (something of concern to both the UK and Japan as well). Canberra has also been unnerved by the recent break-down in Australia-China relations which has left it vulnerable to Chinese information warfare, influence operations and cyber-attack. Political disruption within the United States therefore has and continues to pose very real national security concerns among key American allies. Furthermore, of the UKAJ partner states, Australia is the smallest economy and is financially incapable of

building a larger military footprint in the Southwest Pacific beyond what it already has. It would therefore be in Australia's national interest to join a new strategic, if informal, grouping that is effectively US aligned and committed to upholding the international rules-based order whereby it can leverage its niche strengths with its larger partner-states. All three countries are aligned with the United States, have US forces in their respective countries, and operate US military technology. They all have similar motivations in being US allies but realise that there might be limitations to the alliance network depending on unexpected and fast-changing political currents in Washington DC. A strong tripartite grouping, providing robust defence capability within the Indo-Pacific, will be viewed by the US as an effective contribution to "burden sharing" in defence of an increasingly important region for the US and her allies.

UKAJ Five Point Cooperation Plan



Figure 3 An Izumo class helicopter destroyer of the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force. Image credit, Shutterstock

We at SAGE International believe that developing a trilateral framework between the UK, Australia and Japan in the following order of priority should provide the greatest benefits for participating countries –

1. *Satellite coverage cooperation between the members of UKAJ.*
 - a. This would provide the most obvious and greatest practical utility for a maritime global grouping spread out over vast distances. As RN, RAN and JMSDF units are all highly dependent on space-based assets, especially navigation assets to carry out their respective missions, allowing each country to leverage off each other's satellites would create a network that is global as opposed to national or at best regional in scope.

2. *Undertake studies into the Australian RAMSI model as a model for military deployment by UKAJ in situations other than conventional war.*
 - a. In a multipolar and unstable world where defence budgets are often under stress (having to compete with civilian programs), attempting to find the most effective, innovative and affordable way to deploy military force is critical, especially in situations of crisis intervention. This could include staving off ‘grey zone’ threats, (often under the threshold of war) as well as for humanitarian and rescue missions. The Australian RAMSI mission showed how a light military force supporting and standing in overwatch over foreign and local police forces could have a significant affect.¹⁸ In this case it was defending the government of the Solomon Islands from the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF).
 - b. Developing a trilateral strategy based on Australia’s experience in the Solomon Islands would provide UKAJ with an already tested means for crisis intervention among the island-states of the Indo-Pacific, which are likely areas of strategic contestation between the People’s Republic of China and the West.
3. *Provide a common framework for Defence and Security collaboration between the three nations to enable national forces to co-operate flexibly and responsively in event of security threats.*
 - a. Enhancing common Command, Control and Communication standards to provide a coherent common situation picture.
 - b. To develop high-level political interaction and decision making with supporting intelligence and training.
4. *Pool the official development assistance (ODA) budgets of UKAJ members into one globally significant fund.*
 - a. This would give UKAJ a competitive edge against Chinese untied aid, particularly in areas deemed important by Beijing, such as in East Africa, the Indian Ocean Region, Southeast Asia, the South Pacific and Latin America.
 - b. UKAJ Aid would be complementary to US Aid and could be coordinated with it when appropriate.
5. *Provide a means by which British, Australian and Japanese defence ministries can explore common solutions for capability, maintaining interoperability with the US, and enable their defence industries (DI) to co-ordinate and collaborate with each other as well as provide a collective mechanism to defend UKAJ IP.*
 - a. Establish guidelines for enhanced UKAJ DI coordination and collaboration
 - i. Ensuring the rights of Primes and the rights of SMEs are clearly laid out to enhance cooperation and lessen conflict between them.
 - b. Ensure that mechanisms exist across the whole UKAJ DI enterprise allowing it to work seamlessly together.
 - c. Create trusted methods for sharing IP and technology among UKAJ partners.
 - d. Promote harmonisation of information sharing and export control procedures.
 - e. Encourage mutual cross-investment in defence industry.
 - f. Help encourage innovation in new technologies for their mutual benefit.

¹⁸ Not all security measures require *fully* militarised solutions, especially if the projection of soft power is considered an important objective of the UKAJ grouping.

Conclusion

To recap, bilaterally, the UK and Japan, Australia and Japan and Australia and the UK are each signing significant bilateral defence cooperation, space cooperation and defence industry agreements. Taken together, these agreements mutually benefit each country, allowing them to find complementarity with each other. SAGE International believes that more can be done were all three countries to develop a strategic compact that aligns these developments into a unified overarching strategic framework. Operating in the belief that three medium-sized countries can accomplish more together than apart, a UKAJ strategic compact can have the effect of allowing all three countries to find scales of economy for their respective efforts in a way they cannot as independent sovereign actors.
