Revisiting a Four-Power Alliance

By Rupakjyoti Borah

Reactions to the rise of China and its potential to dominate Asia have fueled debate in many countries over how best to respond. More than four years ago, India, Japan, Australia and the United States envisioned an approach that would provide a counterbalance. It got nowhere. But Indian academic Rupakjyoti Borah argues that it may be time to revisit that initiative.

IN MAY 2007, Japan, India, Australia and the United States launched a new enterprise on the sidelines of an ASEAN Regional Forum meeting in Manila. The Quadrilateral Initiative (QI), as they called it, quickly fizzled out as the four countries backed away from the potential to antagonize China, but it laid the groundwork for increasing co-operation among the four countries in order to ensure that Asia does not become unipolar.

The ties are bearing fruit. A significant development for the Asian and emerging global order went largely unnoticed in October 2010 when India agreed to speed up the mining of its rare earth reserves during the visit of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Japan for an annual bilateral summit. Rare earth minerals are used in various niche areas like petroleum refining, wind turbines, fiber-optics transmission and missile-guidance systems. Though China leads the world in their production, supplying almost 97 percent of the world’s output, India has the world’s fourth largest reserves. India’s move, prompted by concerns that China was using its virtual rare-earth monopoly to threaten other nations, delivered a none-too-subtle message that India and Japan would in future work together to prevent the emergence of a China-dominated Asia.

HISTORIC RELATIONS
The ties between India and Japan go deep into history, dating to the 7th century, when Buddhism made inroads into Japan from its land of birth, India. The famous Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore visited Japan in 1916, at the urging of a Japanese friend, and came to admire the country’s economic, industrial and scientific advances and its rich cultural and literary traditions. During World War II, Japan helped India’s freedom struggle by assisting the Indian National Army as it sought to evict the British from India.

The victory of Japan over Czarist Russia in 1904-05 gave great impetus to nationalist move-
ments in Asia. In his autobiography, India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, mentioned the impact of the Japanese victory. While writing to his daughter Indira, Nehru noted that “Japan’s victory was seen to be due to her adoption of new industrial methods of the West. These so-called Western ideas and methods thus became more popular all over the East.”

Prime Minister Nehru in 1949 donated two Indian elephants to the Ueno Zoo in Tokyo. Japan and India inked a peace treaty and established diplomatic relations in April 1952, one of the first peace treaties that Japan signed after World War II. India’s iron ore played a big role in aiding Japan’s recovery efforts, and after Japanese Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi’s path-breaking visit to India in 1957, Japan started providing yen loans to India.

In World War II, Indian troops under the British flag fought Japanese troops while the fledgling Indian National Army fought Japanese troops while the fledgling Indian National Army fought the British with deep cultural, economic and political connections. India supported the anti-colonial movement in Southeast Asia — through its convening of the Asian Relations Conference in 1947, a special conference on Indonesia in January 1949, chairmanship of the International Control Commission on Indo-China in 1954 and co-sponsoring of the Bandung Conference that gave rise to the non-aligned movement. All of these moves reflected India’s deep involvement in the freedom struggle being waged by the countries of the region. But the pro-Soviet tilt of India’s foreign policy in the period drove a wedge between India and the nations of Southeast and East Asia.

When India conducted a series of nuclear tests in May 1998, it took the world by surprise. Many countries, including Japan, with its deep scars from the atomic bombs in World War II, reacted strongly to the tests. Japan suspended all political and economic cooperation for nearly three years. However, a turnaround was achieved in August 2000, when Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori paid a five-day visit to India. Mori and then-Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee called for a “global partnership.” Since then, relations have seen steady progress. During the visit of Mammohan Singh to Tokyo in 2006 during the tenure of Shinzo Abe, the two prime ministers decided to forge a “strategic partnership.”

THE CHINA CONUNDRUM

Obviously one of the seminal developments of the late 20th and early 21st centuries has been the rapid economic and military rise of China. It is the fastest-growing economy in the world and emerged largely unscathed from the recent global economic meltdown. India is not far behind with the second-fastest-growing economy. The economic potential of China and India is aptly described in a Carnegie Endowment report: “By 2050, the United States and Europe will be joined in economic size by emerging markets in Asia and Latin America. China will become the world’s largest economy in 2032, and grow to be 20 per cent larger than the United States by 2050.”

Indian strategic planners have been voicing concerns over the Chinese “string of pearls” strategy to enclose India in the Indian Ocean region. China has funded ports and refueling stations in Pakistan (Gwadar), Sri Lanka (Hambantota), Bangladesh (Chittagong), and Burma (Sittwe and Kyaukpyu), much to India’s chagrin. Recent media reports from China indicate that it has developed its first stealth fighter — the Chengdu J-20 — and an anti-ship ballistic missile that could sink US aircraft carriers. The newly-developed “D” version of China’s DF-21 medium-range missile could potentially change the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region.

It is in this context that recent relations between India and Japan must be seen. When Prime Minister Singh paid an official visit to Japan in 2006, the two countries affirmed that they are natural partners as among the largest and most developed democracies in Asia, with a mutual stake in each other’s progress and prosperity. Recognizing that Asia is the leading growth center of an interdependent global economy, they indicated their desire to pursue a comprehensive economic partnership to nurture sustainable economic growth, social peace and political tolerance in an open and cooperative regional framework.

In October 2008, India and Japan signed a security accord that was especially momentous because Tokyo had concluded such an agreement with only one other country, Australia. The
India-Japan security agreement marks a significant milestone in building a power equilibrium in Asia. The agreement parallels the 2005 Indo-US defense framework accord, which marked a major transformation of the strained relationship between the two countries.

Both of these agreements focus on counter-terrorism, disaster response, safety of sea lines of communications (SLOC), non-proliferation, bilateral and multilateral military exercises, peacekeeping operations and defense dialogue and co-operation. A further fillip to the bilateral ties was given by the “Joint Statement on Vision for India-Japan Strategic and Global Partnership in the Next Decade,” signed during the bilateral summit in October 2010 in Japan. During the summit, India and Japan also concluded a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), agreed to speed up negotiations on a civil nuclear deal, simplified visa procedures and agreed to work together to secure peace and stability in Asia.

There is no doubt that China has been a factor in this emerging strategic relationship. Official denials notwithstanding, both Japan and India have reasons to be concerned about the future role of China. India’s national psyche still bears the scars of the 1962 war with China, despite efforts to normalize Sino-Indian relations since 1988. China has proliferated missile and nuclear technology to Pakistan, and continues to be a major source of weaponry for that country. India and Japan are China’s next-door neighbors and worry that Beijing’s accumulating power could lead to a Sino-centric Asia. 12

SINO-JAPANESE SKIRMISHES

Buoyed by its surging economy and rapidly accumulating foreign exchange reserves, China has adopted an increasingly assertive posture in Asia, particularly towards Japan, with which it has had a fraught history. In recent months, relations have been marred by a series of unsettling incidents.

When a Chinese trawler rammed into Japanese Coast Guard vessels near the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands on Sept. 7, 2010, China demanded that Japan release the trawler’s crew, which it had taken into custody. Though Japan initially refused, it did so later, only to be met with a Chinese demand for a formal apology and compensation, which Japan refused. It was during this crisis that China unofficially declared a ban on the export of rare earth materials to Japan, sending shock waves through many Japanese companies that depend on Chinese rare-earth supplies. Just over a month later, India agreed to increase its production of rare earth materials.

Again, when North Korea shelled the South Korean island of Yeonpyeong on Nov. 23, 2010, Beijing refused to reprimand Pyongyang, despite being the only country that has any real influence on the North and its leaders.

China has also pushed back or stalled attempts to address issues of concern to India. During the December 15-17, 2010, visit of Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao to India, the two countries failed to resolve many pressing issues. First, unlike US President Barack Obama and French President Nicolas Sarkozy, China was ambiguous on the issue of India’s quest for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, and refused openly to back India. Second, India’s protests over the issuing of stapled visas by China for the residents of its province of Jammu and Kashmir went unheeded. There was also no forward movement on the vexed border issue. The 2,520-mile frontier between India and China is the only one of China’s land borders that has not been demarcated.

INDIA’S IMPORTANCE FOR JAPAN

Japan is heavily dependent on energy supplies from the Middle East, and the safety of its sea lines of communication are a vital security interest. Given this scenario, Japan needs India’s support to keep its SLOCs safe since the Indian Navy has a formidable presence between the Straits of Hormuz and the Straits of Malacca. Maritime co-operation is one of the most important areas of synergy between India and Japan. The Indian Navy in the period post-Sept. 11, 2001, has participated in escort and joint patrolling activities in this region. India’s location places it adjacent to some of the most vital global sea lanes stretching from the Suez Canal and the Persian Gulf to the Straits of Malacca, through which about 55,000 ships and much of the oil from the Gulf region transit each year.13 Conservative estimates suggest that $200 billion worth of oil passes through the Straits of Hormuz annually and $60 billion through the Malacca Strait.

India has also been steadily increasing its naval strength. It is acquiring the augmented and retrofitted 45,000-tonne displacement Kiev-class aircraft carrier Admiral Gorshkov — rechristened the INS Vikramaditya — while at the same time construction has begun on India’s indigenous aircraft carrier. Both of these aircraft carriers are expected to enter service before 2015. The indigenous carrier is expected to carry nearly 30 aircraft including Russian MiG-29K fighters, Kamov-31 helicopters and the indigenous Light Combat Aircraft. The Navy is also considering a plan for a second locally made aircraft carrier.

There is scope for greater defense co-operation, intelligence sharing and joint initiatives on maritime security, counter-terrorism, disaster prevention and management and energy security between India and Japan. Another area of co-operation is in Burma and Afghanistan. India has huge strategic stakes in both countries. Japan has committed considerable sums for reconstruction in Afghanistan. In Burma, it did not impose sanctions against the military junta, preferring instead a policy of constructive engagement, including providing Official Development Assistance (ODA). As in the case of India, there is here, no doubt, an element of countering China.

The Indian and Japanese coast guards have held combined exercises on anti-piracy and search and rescue procedures every year since 2000. Coast guard chiefs visit each other almost every year. The two coast guards exchanged a Memorandum on Co-operation during a Japanese delegation’s visit to India in November 2006. The two countries have also instituted multiple strategic dialogues involving their foreign and defense ministers and national security advisers, as well as service-to-service exchanges, including bilateral and multilateral exercises. The Indian and Japanese space agencies are also to co-operate in capacity-building efforts in disaster management.
India’s profile has also been growing on the international stage. Late last year, the top leadership of all five permanent UN Security Council members visited India, a reflection of India’s rising profile and the desire of these countries to engage with India, especially given its huge economic potential.

INDIA’S IMPROVING TIES WITH THE US
One of the factors that has led to closer relations among the “quadrilateral” powers — the US, India, Japan and Australia — has been the growing ties between India and the US. Although India’s past nuclear tests gave a temporary jolt to the relationship, US President Bill Clinton’s visit to India in March 2000 signaled that the US–India relationship had come of age. India’s location, strong economy and huge pool of highly qualified technical talent make it very important for the United States. The Indo-US civilian nuclear deal is ample testimony to the complete change in the dynamics of the relationship. The signing of the bilateral Agreement for Co-operation Regarding the Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Energy on Oct. 10, 2008, marked the end of India’s nuclear isolation.

In June 2010, the Indian and US governments held the inaugural Indo-US Strategic Dialogue in Washington, which focused on five major areas: strategic cooperation; energy and climate change; education and development; economics, trade and agriculture; and science, technology, health and innovation. Though the two countries would not like to admit it, there are obvious shared concerns about the rise of China, not only in Asia, but also on the global stage.

India and the US have been holding a series of joint military exercises, which would have been unthinkable during the Cold War era. Earlier, Russia was the supplier of choice for the Indian armed forces, which has, of course, changed in the last decade. Many American defense firms have now entered the lucrative Indian defense market. India has bought American military equipment including military transport aircraft, Harpoon missiles and maritime surveillance aircraft. It is noteworthy that American firms bagged Indian military contracts worth nearly $8.7 billion between March 2008 and October 2010. The Indian Air Force (IAF) recently put its first Lockheed C-130J Super Hercules aircraft into service at Hindon air force base, near New Delhi. The aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks also brought India and the US closer together. The American decision to lift nuclear sanctions against India and the emerging regional scenario after Sept. 11 helped to cement a natural alliance between India and the US. The two nations have recognized the prospects for co-operation in maintaining a stable balance of power in the Indian Ocean region and its periphery.

INDIA AND AUSTRALIA GET CLOSE AGAIN
India and Australia have ties that go back to the 18th century, when India played a key role in sending supplies to Australia and trade with Australia came to form an important element in the operations of the British East India Company. Since both were British colonies, Australia’s most immediate and direct links were with India rather than London, as people, especially government employees, moved between the two colonies. India was a key source of food and provisions for Australia; by 1840, a ship left India for Sydney roughly every four days. The Consulate General of India in Sydney opened as a Trade Office in 1941 while the High Commission in Canberra opened in 1945, two years before India’s independence. However, in India’s post-independence era the ties between the two countries suffered on the one hand on account of Australia’s closeness to the American-led Western bloc, and on the other hand due to India’s ties to the Soviet Union. After the break-up of the Soviet Union, Indian foreign policy mandarins had to reorient the country’s foreign policy. It was during this period that India launched its economic reforms, which eventually changed the way countries around the world looked at India. Australia took notice of India’s changed economic profile as reflected in the report India’s Economy at the Midnight Hour.16

However, relations nosedived in the aftermath of India’s nuclear tests in 1998. Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer described the tests as “outrageous acts.” A statement on May 14, 1998, added: “Australia has and will continue with vigour to use regional and international forums to make clear Australia’s opposition to Indian nuclear testing.” He also mentioned the “willful disregard” of world public opinion shown by India in conducting a second round of testing. The slide in the bilateral relationship was only arrested with the visit of then Australian Deputy Prime Minister Tim Fischer to India in February 1999. Australian Prime Minister John Howard went to New Delhi in July 2000, becoming the first Australian prime minister to visit in 11 years. Since then, the relations have been on an upward trajectory. In November 2009, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd also paid a visit to India, during which it was jointly agreed to elevate the relationship to the level of a strategic partnership. A Joint Declaration on Security Co-operation was issued with both countries committing to boosting defense and security cooperation; regional and multilateral cooperation; economic engagement; co-operation in energy, climate change and water resources; science and educational links. Australia’s trade and economic relationship with India has been growing steadily. India became Australia’s third-largest export market in 2009, up from fifth in 2008 and seventh in 2007. Total exports to India were worth $18.2 billion in 2009. Australia’s exports to India have grown at an average annual rate of 24 percent over the past five years. The Indian and Australian trade ministers announced the completion of the Australia–India joint Free Trade Agreement (FTA) feasibility study, recommending that both governments consider negotiating a comprehensive bilateral FTA.

There are still a few areas of concern in Australia–India ties. The incidents of attacks on Indian students in Australia between 2008 and 2010 did a great deal of damage to bilateral ties, especially in India as the Indian media latched on to these stories. The attacks also hurt Australia’s education industry, given that there are more than 90,000 Indian students in Australia — and many more waiting in the wings. Australia has emerged as the second-most-sought-after des-
IS A QUADRILATERAL SECURITY ARCHITECTURE FEASIBLE?

Given the common security interests of India, Australia, Japan, and the US in the Asia-Pacific region, a quadrilateral security architecture could certainly be feasible — something akin to the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD) involving Japan, the US and Australia that was announced in 2005 as a means to evolve a more cohesive security mechanism among the three allies. These three countries were to a large extent successful in aligning China’s concerns that this initiative was hostile.

A quadrilateral security architecture would represent a revival of the earlier initiative, and would also help achieve interoperability of forces of these countries and serve as a bulwark against the growing assertiveness of China in the region. In fact, Australia’s Defence White Paper 2009, Defending Australia in the Asia-Pacific Century: Force 2030, takes note of China’s growing power: “China will also be the strongest Asian military power, by a considerable margin. A major power of China’s stature can be expected to develop a globally significant military capability befitting its size. But the pace, scope and structure of China’s military modernization have the potential to give its neighbors cause for concern if not carefully explained, and if China does not reach out to others to build confidence regarding its military plans.”

During his trip to China in November 2009, President Obama broached the idea of a G-2 consisting of the US and China, but it was promptly shot down by China. Since then, the rift between the US and China has widened. Obama’s tour in November last year of four Asian democracies — India, South Korea, Japan and Indonesia — was seen as sending a message to China that the United States would not hesitate to work with other Asian countries to prevent the rise of a China-dominated Asia.

Given the common security concerns of India, Japan, Australia and the US, a quadrilateral security architecture may well turn out to be the sine qua non to ensure peace and stability in the broader Asia-Pacific region.

The Chinese, for their part, appear to sense that India may be engaged in efforts to contain China’s growing influence in the region. Some Chinese media questioned the rationale behind Prime Minister Singh’s visit to Japan, Malaysia and Vietnam towards the end of October last year. An article in People’s Daily on Oct. 27 quipped, “Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s three-nation visit to Japan, Malaysia and Vietnam has been a media hype at home, being even described as a missionary trip to seek new strategic allies to deal with China, and to showcase India’s resolve to persist [with] its ‘Look East Policy’ on its way to pursue the geopolitical and economic goals and achieve a ‘Big Power’ status in the region, if not the leading power.”

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