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The novel corona virus established itself as the largest outbreak of disease since the Spanish flu of 1918, as it spread across the world in a span of few months. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will affect all segments of the world including society, governance, trade, development, economy, politics and security. The most significant impact is likely to be its ability to shape the world order, which was already grappling with a subtle yet steady rise of nationalism, de-globalisation forces, isolationism, xenophobic protectionism and reducing multilateralism (*a sign of change in the established norms of global engagements*). The pandemic accelerated the transition to a more divided world order in which the contours of the emergent international system are not yet clear. As historian Yuval Noah Harari wrote¹, “*More and more countries are becoming nationalist and protectionist, in some cases, even authoritarian*”. The likely scenario of a post-COVID-19 world could be the emergence of China in a new uni-polar world or one in which there is a collective push back against China for its ‘*Chernobyl*’ moment. However, it also appears that neither the US nor China is positioned to emerge as a winner from COVID-19, which would significantly shift the balance of world power in its favour. The alliances and economic partnerships are therefore going to be increasingly

important in a world of growing multi-polarity. The increasingly assertive stand of China in the past decade in land/ maritime disputes, the debt trap diplomacy of OBOR², increased presence in IOR (*Hambantota, Gwadar*) the first overseas base at Djibouti³ has brought into focus/question the narrative of “*peacefully rising⁴ and status quoist China*”. The recent wolf warrior diplomacy witnessed post COVID-19 coupled with a number of belligerent actions viz ramming of a Vietnamese vessel by Chinese Ship⁵ near the Paracel Islands, enacting new national security law for Hong Kong, posturing against Bhutan⁶ by a statement that the “*borders has never been delimited and that there are disputes over Eastern, Central and Western sectors for long,*” retaliation with tariffs on Australian exports⁷ (*including barley and beef*), harassment of an exploration vessel operated by Malaysia’s state-run oil company in SCS⁸ and creating a record of sorts by sending its vessels into the waters of the Senkaku Islands (*island in ECS controlled by Japan*) for 66 consecutive days⁹, signals Chinese attempts to reinforce its position on various border disputes exploiting the world’s preoccupation with COVID-19. The Chinese displayed unparalleled aggression with India and crossed over the LAC and engaged in violent clashes since early May 20 culminating in the bloody clash at Galwan¹⁰ in Jun 20, resulting in death of 20 Indian soldiers and an unknown number of PLA troops. They appear to have taken an inflexible stance with large scale military build-up and refusing to defuse tensions in spite of several rounds of military and diplomatic engagements. The tense situation has the potential of cascading into a serious escalation along the unresolved India-China borders. The various attempts to exploit the uncertainty/vulnerabilities of nations in the post COVID-19 world by China have met with a pushback and stiff resistance. In this context, the resurgence of Quad 2.0 appears to be a natural manifestation with a numbers of voices

even in India (*a reluctant player in Quad 1.0 so as not to hurt Chinese sensitivities*) talking about Quad assuming a larger role in security. It has given a sense of legitimacy to partner countries to expand the frame work and allowed them to work closely in tackling regional challenges. Thus any opposition/misgivings about the Quad are likely to be overcome by growing consensus in the region in light of continuing Chinese assertive behaviour with other nations particularly its neighbours. China's *lack of transparency on the pandemic, wolf warrior diplomacy¹¹, revisionist behaviour, debt trap strategy by means of the BRI, has created an anti-China sentiment* that India can and should exploit effectively.

Genesis-Quad

The germination of the concept of Quad can be traced back to the Malabar Naval exercise series between India and the US since 1992¹². The exercises were discontinued for some years following conduct of India's nuclear tests in 1998 and then re-started regularly in 2004. Moreover, the '*Tsunami Core Group¹³*' formed in 2004 between **India, Japan, Australia and the US** to combine HADR capabilities in response to the Boxing Day Tsunami in Indian Ocean was a precursor to these arrangements. In 2007, the scope of Malabar was enhanced¹⁴ for the first time to include other states i.e. Australia, Japan and Singapore. Simultaneously, in the same year an informal strategic dialogue between India, US, Japan and Australia was started as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) with a shared objective to ensure and support a "*free, open and prosperous*" Indo-Pacific region.

Notably, the idea of Quad¹⁵ was first mooted by Japanese PM Mr Shinzo Abe. The concept was protested strongly by China, calling

it an anti-China coalition prompting Australia to withdraw and later India became agnostic of such an arrangement. Quad 1.0 as this would later be known went into oblivion with the resignation of PM Shinzo Abe in Sep 2007, a champion of the arrangement. This was followed by US announcing its trilateral engagement with Japan and Australia over the relatively nascent quadrilateral initiative. India on its part was uncomfortable with such an arrangement from the beginning as it viewed it from the prism of strategic autonomy as also it was concerned about provoking China and was apprehensive of Australia's stand on the issue of China. While Quad 1.0 was relegated to the back ground, the Indo-US engagement continued with bilateral Malabar exercises annually increasing in scale, complexity and interoperability. It was in 2015 that, Japan's status as a permanent member of Malabar¹⁶ was announced which again invoked a protest by the Chinese saying that¹⁷ "*relevant countries should not provoke confrontation and create tension in the region*".

Quad 2.0

Since 2017, Chinese belligerence increased in the maritime and land disputes, debunking to a large extent the long held theory of a "*peacefully rising China*". Consequently, the likeminded democracies or Asia's "*Democratic Security Diamond*"¹⁸ (*floated by PM Shinzo Abe in Dec 2012*) viz Australia, India, Japan and US sought a rejuvenation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue now referred as Quad 2.0. Ironically, the '*China factor*'-which was the reason for failure of the Quad 1.0 to mature, now a decade later appears to be the pivot around which Quad 2.0 is taking shape. The concept of the Indo-Pacific replacing the Pivot to Asia or Asia-Pacific construct of the US appears to be accommodating the revitalised Quad 2.0.

Significantly, the Indo-Pacific construct has found congruence across the Quad partners. A 2016 Australian Defence White Paper identified the emerging geo-political changes in the Indo-Pacific as central to Australia's Security; the US renamed its Pacific Command to Indo Pacific Command¹⁹ (USINDOPACOM) a symbolic but strategic messaging; Japan identified challenges and opportunities in free and open Indo-Pacific and India set up a dedicated Indo-Pacific desk²⁰ in the MEA. China continuing militarisation of the South China Sea such as creating artificial Islands, sending coast guard, maritime militia and survey vessels to harass and exert control over vital trade routes in the region coupled with economic coercion, influence operations has only hastened the growing congruence among Quad partners. Accordingly, it is no surprise that the Quad countries are now stressing on their '*shared commitment*' to the '*rule-based international system*' (RBIS) in the Indo-Pacific and the need to preserve the freedom of navigation, democratic values, stability and openness in the region.

Notably there has been increased convergence of India's bilateral relations with the Quad members with a significant reset in defence ties with respective countries. India has also established a 2+2 foreign and defence dialogue mechanism with US, Japan and Australia²¹, (*the only strategic partners with which it has such arrangement*), reflecting a broader convergence and understanding.

Australia

Australia's views on Quad have changed over the decade (since 2007) and it now sees it as an important forum to discuss regional challenges. At the same time

The India-Australia relations have witnessed an increasing convergence

of strategic ties since the election of PM Narendra Modi in 2014. The two sides reached a landmark agreement on nuclear cooperation in the same year ending a contentious legacy on nuclear issues. Further, both sides conducted the first joint naval exercise AUSINDEX-15²² in 2015 and the first joint army exercise in 2016 eventually paving way for the state visit of PM Malcolm Turnbull to India in 2017, providing a boost to bilateral relationship. The steady growth in Indo-Australia relations culminated in the '*Comprehensive Strategic Partnership*²³' signed in Jun 2020 in a virtual summit. Significant among the agreements over a range of areas was the, '*Mutual Logistic Support Arrangements*²⁴', providing both the countries access to each other's naval port and bases. A MoU to enhance collaboration between their defence technology and research organizations was also inked, signaling a strategic convergence of interests between the two countries—a significant shift in the hither-to-fore cautious approach. The logical fallout of this would be to expand the Malabar exercise to a quadrilateral initiative by including Australia in the next exercise planned in 2021.

Japan

Japan is the most ardent supporter of Quad, as PM Abe was the architect of like-minded democracies coming together as partners in a quadrilateral format to counter China. India and Japan have been strengthening its ties over the last decade and recently established a 2+2 ministerial level dialogue²⁵, increased the number of bilateral military exercises²⁶ and are cooperating in infrastructure development projects. There is a number of existing dialogue platforms such as the Annual Defence Ministerial Dialogues, Defence Policy Dialogue and the NSA's Dialogue reflecting the growing trajectory of a comprehensive partnership. Recently in

Sep 2020, both sides signed a military pact enabling them to exchange supplies and logistic support. The Acquisition and Cross-servicing Agreement ²⁷(ACSA) is a major step in closer coordination between the two sides and indicates the developing confidence (*Japan already has similar arrangements with the US, UK, France, Canada and Australia*). Both sides share a common concern of China's growing assertiveness in the region; Japan's regular protests against the presence of Chinese ships near the disputed Senkaku Islands and India's long standing border dispute with China with recent assertive intrusions by PLA across the LAC. The strengthening bilateral relations are evident in the Japan's 2020 Defence White Paper²⁸ which mentions to "*advance the bilateral security cooperation*" with India indicating the seriousness with which Japan holds its defence partnership with India.

United States

India-US relations have witnessed a rapid growth in the past 15 years with an understanding of common threats and challenges facing both sides as also convergence of strategic interests (*i.e. democratic political architecture-India being the largest democracy while US the oldest*) aptly reflected in the statement of Pentagon²⁹ "*The US-China strategic partnership has strengthened significantly during the past two decades, based on convergence of strategic interests and the US and India continuous to use their deepening relationship to build new partnerships*". The strengthen of the strategic partnership is reflected in the 2+2 dialogue (*2nd dialogue held in 2019*), signing of military agreements viz ten year Defence Framework Agreement in 2005, Logistic Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) in 2016³⁰, designation of India as a major defence partner³¹ by the US in 2016, elevation of

India to Strategic Trade Authorisation³² (Tier 1), Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement³³ (COMCASA) in 2018 and the Industrial Security Agreement (ISA). Moreover, procurement of latest high-tech defence equipment from US worth \$18 bn³⁴ in recent years is indicative of the close ties in strategic security and defence affairs. The two sides recently signed a key agreement to facilitate transfer of defence technology during the 2nd 2+2 meeting in Dec 19 to accelerate the pace of Defence Technology and Trade Initiative (DTII). Cooperation is also visible in multi-lateral forums such as UNSC, G-20, Quad, Japan-America-India (JAI) alliance, FATF etc. Also, while differences remain in the trade relationship, there has been some progress towards completion of Phase-I of an India-US trade agreement. US is India's largest trading partner with bilateral trade totaling \$142 bn in 2018. New Delhi and Washington appreciate the convergence of mutual interests and the requirement of close cooperation in maintaining peace and stability particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. This is even more important in the context of growing assertiveness by China for establishing its influence in the region, particularly exploiting the post-pandemic environment. In this context traction for a more viable and potent Quad 2.0 appears to be sustainable in the near future.

Prognosis Quad 2.0

India has made substantive additions to its existing strategic and defence cooperation with the members of Quad and all partners are increasingly aligned in their shared concerns on regional security. This augurs well for the future of Quad as India was seen as the "*weakest link in the Quad*"³⁵. In January 2020, Australia and the US³⁶ expanded their geographical definition of the Indo-Pacific to match that of India

and Japan. Preceding this was the upgraded India-Japan-US trilateral and India-Japan-Australia-US quadrilateral dialogues. Fundamentally the revival of Quad at its core is a symbolic signalling from the four Indo-Pacific democracies as a way to tell China that “*we are watching and we are alarmed*”.

The reset Quad 2.0 is more robust, evident by the first in person summit of all member nations on September 24 this year, as a follow up of the virtual meet in March initiated at the behest of President Joe Biden (*whilst is was essentially resurrected during the Trump administration*). The quick metamorphosis of Quad 2.0 from an official level dialogue in 2017 to a ministerial level in 2019 and now the apex summit in 2021, reflects the concerns of all partners alarmed by China's aggressive actions. The nations appear strategically more aligned in their vision for promoting security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region. Moreover, the escalation of dispute on Sino-India borders, resulting in the first deadly clash in 45 years has rendered India as a more committed partner. This is significant as Australia, Japan and US are already close partners with a network of formal military alliances, strategic dialogues and existing agreements for sharing of intelligence. The participation of India with the world's second largest population, third largest defence budget, fifth largest economy, geographical location straddling the Indian Ocean and an escalating strategic competition with China, bodes well for sustainability of Quad 2.0. While, it is evident that Quad is not an Asian NATO as it lacks the formal alliance structure in the current form, it is not lacking in comprehensive structural strength. The combined resources of all four members are significant with an aggregate GDP of \$29.6 tn (*double the size of \$13.6 tn Chinese economy*), combined military budget of \$877 bn (*nearly four times of China's \$261 bn*). A recent report from the Heritage foundation observes, “*The Quad represents not*

just a quarter of the world's population (1.8 bn) but a little over quarter of world's economic activity (GDP). A quarter of all global FDI flows (averaging over \$380 bn a year) come from Quad countries. And by 2018, the Quad held a FDI stock of \$ 8.7 tn or roughly one dollar for every four dollars ever invested abroad."

The Quad 2.0 is expected to strengthen in future in spite of the lingering sting of failed Quad 1.0. This is due to various factors, the unbridled rise of China's military as its economic power aggregates, unilateral pursuance of new international order as also bipartisan agreement in Washington on "*strategic competition with China*". These changes in geo-political landscape are a primer for greater consolidation between the four maritime democracies in the Indo-Pacific. The opening remarks by the Quad leaders in the first in-person summit point to a greater convergence. President Biden mentioned about Quad as a group of democratic partners "*who share a world view and have a common vision for the future*"³⁷. Prime Minister Suga projected Quad as an "*Extremely significant initiative, designed to promote a free and open international order based on the rule of law in the Indo-Pacific*", an apparent reference to China. Actually promoting security and prosperity in the region is the *raison d'être* of Quad, which can be achieved by cooperation between the four partners. The Washington summit identified new areas of collaboration; Infrastructure; Space and Cyber security; Education and People-to-People relations in an apparent effort to project Quad as a non-defence, non-military arrangement focusing on softer issues. The plan is to promote sustainable infrastructure with the aim to align the Quad with Build Back Better World (B3W) partnership of G7 with focus on key elements of B3W; digital connectivity to include deployment of secure, open and transparent 5G, climate, health security and gender quality, Infrastructure, cyber security, working group on space, in education the

Quad fellowship programme (*25 scholars from each Quad country in STEM programme*). The working group established earlier on vaccines, climate and emerging technologies have shown some progress with commitment to denote over 1.2 bn doses globally.

Seeing the current traction and the likely suspicious view of China, the aspect of '*defence and maritime security*' is likely to stay outside the formal framework of Quad as of now. These aspects will continue to be through other mechanism as the '*Malabar exercise*', bilateral or trilateral managements such as AUKUS as member nations would not want it to be projected / viewed as an '*Asian NATO*'. As institutionalism of Quad has gained momentum, it should expand the agenda to include cooperation in maritime domain awareness, space and cyber domain continue with participation of Australia in the Malabar exercise, adding HADR response, expanding joint training with Quad militaries, adding new types of joint exercises, organising regular Quad Heads of State meeting as also issuing joint statements after each meeting conveying the intent.

Conclusion

India should strengthen its foreign policy outreach with Quad members and form a united front to challenge China's belligerence and revisionist policy to alter the status quo along the India-China border and the larger Asian region. COVID-19 and its consequent pressure on domestic economies have emboldened Chinese aggressive military ambitions. For India, this grouping is critical as increased cooperation across a broad spectrum of issues will assist in dealing with the wide array of challenges and opportunities in the Indo-Pacific region as also make Quad a viable and robust mechanism for coordination. It is evident

that, Quad is the first major multi-lateral organisation where India is an equal partner and has much leverage enabling it to punch above its weight. This is also an opportunity for India to work with technologically advanced economies to “*build habits of cooperation*”, while confronting the challenges of future in the Indo-Pacific region. Moreover, India’s active engagement in the Indo-Pacific will boost its Act East Policy and enable closer ties with ASEAN and countries such as Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar and Singapore. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided an opportunity to enhance the scope of Quad. Far from entrenching China’s regional pre-eminence, it has intensified the pushback by Indo-Pacific powers, which are likely to deepen their security cooperation.

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BRIGADIER LS LIDDER

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