

## **The Quad and its Transmute: Coordinated-Cooperation, Convergent-Coalition, Capacitive-Compact**

The constellation of liberal democracies situated across extended coordinates straddling the Indo-Pacific expanse, have convened in a manner that constitutes a mechanism, in fascinating organic evolution. Emanating from the inadvertence of adversity, steeped in cooperative functioning of respective navies, dispensing ameliorative succor and sustenance to marooned populaces lacerated by the 2004 tsunami; to the more recent diplomatically cultivated coalition, emphasizing and prioritizing ‘good order at sea’ in normative militating statecraft; through to the most recent echelon political commitment for synergised partnership at strategic capacitation; it’s the salutary and seminal progression of a construct, in pluralised beneficence. Security and growth are universalised strategic considerations; impulses, secularly at work, across preponderantly-ensconced, ascendant-rising, and glacially-emerging sovereign trajectories, alike. Yet, the environ of searing US-China geostrategic competition, forged amidst intensified strategic-enmeshing, within complexly-interdependent regional orders and the overarching global milieu, is mandating the crafting of axes of aggregation, viz., *the contrived conjoin of Indian and Pacific ocean vectors into a composite*, and disaggregation, i.e., *the specific subset collectivisation of the quartet of sovereigns*, in pursuance of navigating the angularities that stem from inevitable juxtaposition and twining, in same vein. It behoves sobering assessment that, the Quad concert of resident and extra-territorial Indo-Pacific states are grappling with the geopolitical quandaries and geo-economic dilemmas procreated by China’s formidable hegemonic rise and predatory dimensions of its burgeoning comprehensive national power. However, the dint of the Middle Kingdom’s initial hubristic derision of the Quad, as “*sea-foam*” *destined for swift dissipation*, mutating to whining refrain, that it represents a “*small circle of group politics promoting selective multilateralism*”, speaks as much to the potential traction of the quadrangular-setting’s elicit and exude, as to the rich ironies of Beijing’s averment. (Krishnan, 2021) There is little gainsaying that conceptualisation of the Indo-Pacific is no longer up for contention, viewed in the construct’s pervasive embrace, not just by Quad sovereigns (US, Japan, India and Australia), but increasingly, by out-of-sphere protagonists, inhabiting the broad-sweep Euro-Atlantic spaces. Articulated strategic calculus engages in conversational dissemble, through the masquerade of veritable intentions of counteracting if not out-rightly containing China, by disingenuously suggesting that, the strategic appraisal and appreciation of the Indo-Pacific expanse, is neither China-centric, nor arrayed and ranged against it; to the obvious vexations of Beijing. Since its WTO accession, strategic preoccupations have coalesced around managing the unfolding rise of the mercantilist behemoth, which, during the last decadal epoch, has morphed into managing terms of engagement, with an arguably pre-eminent great-power contender.

Keywords: Quad, Quad-Plus, China, Indo-Pacific, Strategic-Enmeshing, Selective-Multilateralism.

### **The ‘Quad’ and the China Challenge**

Notwithstanding the surging salience of the Quad on the strategic canvass of the Indo-Pacific, shaping strategic discourse and impinging on calculus of statecraft, the primacy of the statist Chinese challenge cannot be greater underscored, in regional and global schema, of dependencies and interdependencies. Traditional understandings of a tinderbox Asian landscape, reposed of nuclear enabled sovereigns and nationally delimited powerful standing armies, that could itself provoke atavistic conflagrations, have receded, in favour of visages of portending conflicts, that could spur from hegemonic footprints and endeavours at exclusivist operationalization of busily transited shipping-routes, precluding manoeuvres in sea-lanes of communication, employing of anti-access area denial (A2AD) stratagems along established and curated maritime based industrial corridors, vide stranglehold over port facilities and its infrastructure holdings; besides, the pioneering ‘strategic-depth’ quest in resource-endowed ocean-floors.

The Quad confronts a Chinese power projection challenge increasingly domineering in the Asia-Pacific, and beckoning on the Indian Ocean Region's (IOR's) horizon, that stands unparalleled in historicity. Chinese "sticky power" militating through the multitudinous dimensions of multi-vectored connectivity, heft of industrial and financial commerciality and technological allure, and alternative architectures of diplomatic comity, is drastically removed from the erstwhile Soviet Union, creating irresistible equities for interchanging sovereigns, who are witting suitors, despite sentence of pyrrhic costs of deep-hewing. China is poised to eclipse the US as the largest economy by 2027/28, a timeline expedited by the earnest rebound of its economy in the wake of the pandemic, whose proliferating cross, they continue to bear. With its festoon as the world's largest naval fleet in 2020, Washington acknowledges, albeit grudgingly, the near peer power exalts of Beijing, from the standpoint of militaristic power projection and hegemony. And with latest US intelligence missives, red-flagging the burgeon of Chinese technological prowess, most notably, through its prospective build of a humungous artificial intelligence, quantum computing and BAU technologies ecosystem, and its inexorable pursuit of infiltration and surveillance instrumentalities, at data harness, management, and superintendence, it makes the community and commons of the Indo-Pacific, susceptible to disruptive-technologies leavened Chinese machinations, if not purposefully and tangibly counterpoised. (Smith, 2020)

And if this wasn't enough, China is materially impugning the neo-liberal firmament of a rules based international order, through its transmogrifying interpretation of inveterately espoused global norms, and threshold-standards for regimes. Legitimised principles and processes of consensus, pluralism, and transparency, are being short-changed and supplanted, through the actualising promise of veritable performance, albeit, predatorily legitimated. No wonder then that, President Biden framed it as the dialectic, between a dispensation of autocratic disposition, convinced of the superiority of its system vis-à-vis the democratic way of life and endeavor; a reckoning for the credence and resilience of the latter. China's pronouncement of its intentions to proactively shape a futuristic Technical Standards Initiative 2035, enjoining parameters that would punctuate the entire technology genesis and applications spectrum, is sure vestige of the pressures on norm constitution and purveyance. While the democratic character of the Quad constellation countries, can be oft-touted, as a refined and higher order alternative to China's statist praxis, it can also be its undoing, as dissensions and dissonance inherent in democratic societies, and reflected in the varying predilections of elites, renders them vulnerable to Beijing's wedging shenanigans.

China has never accepted the formulation of the Indo-Pacific framework, rejecting the notion of a conjoin of twin oceans into a composite whole, and characterising it as an attempt to bulwark and cordon sanitaire against it and its legitimate rise; embracing the usage of the 'two-oceans' piloted strategy instead. (Panda, 2018) China's claim of entailing a militaristic power projection, beyond its Pacific oriented successive island chain remits, and into the Indian Ocean extant, for addressing its natural resources (energy and food) security, is specious, when squared-up against the tonality of its deepening naval presence (rising tide of submarine sojourns and increasing incidence of hydrography primed vessels), and tenor of its strategic investments in island and coastal sovereigns, inundating these ocean-littorals, in fiscally parlous ensnare. Nevertheless, it continues to ford its way through the Indo-Pacific arc, bringing its instrumentalities of swift political decision-making, focussed operations of its deep-pocket statist corporations, compelling disinformation and propaganda campaigns, and tangible performance quotient, to bear; incandescent, in the infrastructural sprawl of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), in particular, the MSR alignment of it. This proposition is often matched by democratic cliques in the Indo-Pacific, through pontificating-platitudes, hallowed-homilies, doctrinaire-preaching, encumbering-conditionality, policy-drift, and stakeholder-slothfulness, all of which makes the Quad's task of counteracting Chinese designs, arduous.

The grandiose unveiling of the India-Japan collaborated 'Asia-Africa Growth Corridor' (AAGC) enterprise in 2017, that envisaged a meld between Tokyo's Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (PQI) initiative and New Delhi's Act-East strategy, was accompanied by the former's announcement of a \$200 billion commitment, which has since evaporated amidst fledgling fortunes of the once potentially capstone alternative to the Chinese BRI.

Similarly, Washington embarrassed itself by pitching its stall out on a measly \$113 million financial tranche, reinforcing enunciation of its Indo-Pacific strategy in 2018, a transpiring that had Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi amused, on tokenism of a \$16 trillion economy. (Economic Times, 2018) Mounting a cogent counterbalance to the Chinese ingress on a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), requires a synergised partnership between the Quad countries that leverages the respective strengths of each of the constituents individually, segues them wherever they are a mutual fit in terms of commonality of purpose and outcomes, and collectivises their projects towards consolidation of the Quad and its sector-priorities. For instance, the currently languishing AAGC initiative could be buttressed, by tethering it to the US-led Blue Dot Network (BDN) initiative, where physical capacitation conceptualisation of the former mates and fuses with the ideation of a sound and sustainable investments framework of the latter. (D'Ambrogio, 2019) While whim-and-caprice-regime sovereign-outliers in the Indo-Pacific choosing to be co-opted by Beijing, cannot be helped, at least mainstream countries, gravitating to China, could be weaned off it.

### **The Quad and the Problem of its Cohere: Like-Mindedness more than Like-Minded**

The 'Quad' iteratively defines itself as a collective of "like-minded" participants, a hackneyed characterisation that merits deeper investigation, as to the scope and veracity of its construed harmony. While there aren't qualms over the dint of the sovereign four, being entrenched democracies of pedigree, they are yet democracies and democracies, which cannot simply be lumped together as concordant; their polity and societies being from differentiated cognitive templates and cultural contexts. It's tough to weave a multicultural but civilizational India who has to contend with the vortex of traditional and non-traditional South Asian security threats, yet, exudes a resplendent geo-civilizational neighbourhood flanking either side of the Indian Ocean, with a culturally hidebound Japan, still coming to terms with the excesses of its imperial past, and plausibly obsessed with the overhang of nuclear purge. Similarly, it's fraught to run a recurrent thread with the other two immigrant nations of US and Australia, knitted in their detachment from regional hotspots, inducing attendant bliss of geographical insularity. In economic terms, despite a broad commitment to an environment of liberalised reforms, they are differently oriented and textured policy-principled economies, encompassing industrial powerhouses, technological hubs, commodities exporters, and consumer markets, alike. What brings them ostensibly on the same page, and endeavouring to rendition from the same hymn-sheet, is the single trick pony issue of the ascendance of China, in its more recent buccaneering streak, spanning the Indo-Pacific and arguably pan-Asia, manifesting truculent consequences, to the detriment of each of the Quad principals.

Contention is rife over what Quad constituents make of the Indo-Pacific expanse in terms of whether they partake in commonality over its geopolitical contours, geo-economic dimensions and geo-strategic canvass. Despite protestations of harmony, the US strategic view of the Indo-Pacific, notwithstanding Trump's allude to the nomenclature at the APEC Summit in Vietnam (2017) and rechristening of its Pacific Command theatre command as the Indo-Pacific operations command (2018), still bears down predominantly on the Asia-Pacific vector within the Indo-Pacific regional milieu, most recently observed in President Biden's laggard recourse to the rubric in discourse, and early 2+2 dialogues with Japan and South Korea. One cannot discern much interest evinced by Washington in the IOR, beyond Secretary Pompeo's touchdowns in Colombo and Male during late 2020, and telephonic outreach to Bangladesh, to heave the triumvirate, off-China. Washington remains preoccupied with hemming Chinese militarization of the South China Sea, keeping tabs on North Korean nuclear and missile brinkmanship, preserving their hub-and-spokes alliance regiments along the Western Pacific longitudinal littoral from Seoul to Canberra, and sustaining soft security and economically beneficent enterprise with the ASEAN.

Japan in contrast, has long antecedence of familiarity with the Indian Ocean expanse and onwards to Africa, on account of his Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) support to South-South initiatives. It also has on-going projects across the ASEAN geographical spread, especially in peninsular Mekong Asia. Despite this, its TICAD framework remains circumscribed, and assorted physical-build forays dotting the IOR are underwhelming, with sweepstakes concentrated around mitigating Chinese malevolence around the Senkaku islands and broader East China Sea, and its incremental territorial creep across the South China Sea, with potential preclusions to unfettered navigation, for commercial and societal welfare.

Australia's Indo-Pacific passions stem from its perceived profile as a bridge nation to the two cavernous water-bodies. Yet, its exertions emanate from a desire to diversify relations across the Indo-Pacific, but majorly through deepening strategic cooperation with maritime East and South East Asian states, the fashioning of a comprehensive strategic partnership with New Delhi in 2020, notwithstanding. India since 2015, has embraced an intrepid maritime orientation, which is the lynchpin to its Act-East policy compact. However, despite assertions of its prominence in the Pacific vector of the Indo-Pacific too, the configuration and trajectory of its S-A-G-A-R outreach, carries distinct IOR-wide consolidation.

The attribute of likeminded parties was never the strong suit of the Quad, from the earliest of onsets. If Australia was the known entity to play truant, prioritizing mercantilism with China over confronting it, back in 2007, then India, which was invested in forging the non-western BRIC forum, and helmed by a national dispensation that saw its strategic encirclement in almost fatalistic terms, was also guilty of cop-out.(Chellaney, 2007) The US was second-guessing too, sentient of the imperative for constructive Chinese disposition in the Six Party dialogue mechanism on North Korea, besides being chastened by the metastasizing economic and financial stasis at home.(Haidar, 2020) Since resurrection of the Quad dialogue process in 2017, it adopted a consultative forum format over successive officials' level meetings, where strategic trust was so heady that they could never rustle-up a Joint Statement until the Foreign Ministers meeting in October 2020, and meetings were swaddled in New Delhi and Canberra's constant desire to not offend China, thereby appeasing its worse instincts, until the misplaced chickens came home to roost, in the pandemic.

From its re-entry back into the diplomatic fold, the Quad has stayed on message, harping on maintaining plurality of sovereign-action across the Indo-Pacific; upholding the international legal firmament and legal regimes such as UNCLOS, as the epochal arbiter inter-se disputes; rejecting unilateralist cartographic re-imagination of maritime-spaces jurisdiction, both as a tenet and actor-phenomenon, and demurring on any notions of exclusivist delimitation and hegemonic corral of maritime territories, be it the South China Sea, the East China Sea, or anywhere else.(Envall, 2020) This apart, readouts would often speak to the assortment of items in discussion, from the roller-coaster amplification of the North Korea nuclear and ballistic missile threat, that spooks Japan and has the US on qui-vive, to New Delhi's abiding concern over persisting cross-border terrorism, to which neither of Japan and Australia, can quite relate.

Japan and Australia are treaty allies of the United States, and reflexively count on Washington's tutelage, in security arbitration for regional stability. India, for its part, is a natural ally, that covets the Strategic Partnership with the US and sees the progressive upswing in bilateral and regional cooperation, as pivotal to its national development and consummation of major power ambitions, however, despite long emerging from the chrysalis of non-alignment, still puts a premium on strategic autonomy, in refusing subordination to US grand strategies and agnostic aversion to reductionist alliances, but desirous of deeper strategic coordination.(Basu, 2020). It's worth examining the angularities, replete within the Quad. India and Australia fashioned a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership vide a remotely held Leader's Summit in July 2020, that pledges to ramp-up bilateral cooperation to a whole new orbit, yet, a landmark free trade agreement or even a limited phased deal, continues to be elusive. India and Japan continue to harness their broadsheet 'Special Strategic and Global Partnership' blueprint for 2025, yet, lingering Indian concerns over the unsatisfactory operation of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), are not lost on anyone. Tokyo and Canberra, endeavoured to coax and cajole New Delhi to remain within the ASEAN mooted but China domineering RCEP fold, a trading architecture untenable for India to stay within in preservation of its national interests, but a trading arrangement that Japan and Australia have enthusiastically joined. Similarly, India remains out-of-bounds from the now defunct US initiated Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), now the Japanese spearheaded Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Japan, India and Australia have commenced to put the building-blocks of a trilateral Supply Chains Resilience Initiative (SCRI), which avowedly seeks to attenuate the pronounced dependence on China, by mitigating critical sector supplies from pharmaceuticals to automotive parts, telecom and electricity equipment, etc., through indigenised and autonomous production. This said, India reportedly shot down the Japanese suggestion of incorporating ASEAN countries, within the SCRI.

Each of the members within the Quad embodies varied expectations, from bonding within the collective. The US comprehends itself to be in an existential competition with China, for great power stakes and status, which translates into an objective quest for regional predominance of the centripetal Indo-Pacific, as a stepping-stone to global pre-eminence. For Washington, stewarding participation within the Quad is aimed at retracing the power-projection timelines where scaling back modernization of the Chinese military juggernaut seems impossible. Japan harbours anxieties over perceived unlawful Chinese militarization of the islands to which they remain competing claimants, and competes with the Middle Kingdom on a range of portfolios, from hard and soft wired logistical capacity building, either side of the Malacca, to digitalised technology and 5G applications. However, its niche companies solicit Chinese peers and covet the gargantuan Chinese market, across a slew of high-tech sectors, from artificial intelligence, hydrogen fuel cycle, lithium enabled batteries, EVs and the ilk. Australia's irrepressible profile as a primary commodities exporter has left it addicted to a courting Chinese market, such that up to ninety per cent of its coal, finds off-take, in happy times. And when things go pear-shaped, as is incumbent, Canberra has to confront the vexing realities of punitive taxes on lifestyle products, exerted duress on its coal shipments, and foreclosures on inbound tourists and higher education students; measures, that perfunctorily flow from the Communist party-state, which brooks scant compunctions, in leveraging economic punishment, as perceived comeuppance.(Lee, 2020)

### **The Quad and its Push for 'Good Order at Sea': Non-Traditional Soft-Security in New Hue**

The constituents of the eventual Quad grouping, originally banded, in informal mission engagement amidst perdition, when the debilitating concourse of circumstances in the wake of the ravaging tsunami of Boxing Day 2004, requited New Delhi, Tokyo, Canberra and Washington, to deploy their naval footprint in scythed sections within the IOR, in pursuance of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR). The Quad which conflates with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue harks back to the Tsunami Core Group that was assembled in 2004, drawing together diplomats from the four countries, and whose fortunes and travails were best described by US House Rep. Marc Grossman, who said "*it was an organisation that never met...never issued a communiqué, never created a secretariat, and took as one of its successes, its own demise.*"(Grossman, 2005) What began, as albeit unfortunate serendipity, crystallised into a set of bilateral, trilateral and multilateral discussions, ensuing, on catalysing productive maritime regional cooperation for mutual benefit, with the dislocating vagaries and vicissitudes of ocean-based non-traditional but soft-security threats, uppermost in minds. Subsequently though, the Quad alignment was challenged by surging incidents of piracy, infesting the East African littoral, around the Horn of Africa. The distinctive maritime features spanning the Indo-Pacific, from the cloistered and straggled Malacca straits, to the pristine stretches, outbound from strategic waterways in the Western Indian Ocean, offer opportunities for low order subversions in the form of human-trafficking, IUU fishing, and contraband and piracy activities, with the potency to impair and impede commercial interests and national security. While the post-tsunami coalesced Quad formation, did not appropriate itself in those precise terms, individual countries nevertheless, adopted robust mitigating and purging postures in enlightened self-interest, which has helped to significantly tame the scourge of such sub-national asymmetric interdiction. The US has deployed advanced naval technologies, including the use of drones in its African Command operations for surveillance and intelligence-collation activities, since the apogee of piracy in 2009. Australia has partaken in anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, as part of the security consortium in the Western Indian Ocean, besides concluded wide-ranging accords with India pertaining to mechanics of white shipping and maritime domain awareness, even as private security companies in vogue are buttressed vide marshalling of multilateral coalitions, in leverage of anti-trafficking and counter-terrorism efforts. Yet, the Quad countries' strategic focus is stationed in the crosshairs of South East Asian straits.

The concept of 'Good Order at Sea' is widely understood, as the body of enacted regimes and collectivised sovereign actions, ensuring the securitized insulation of shipping thoroughfare from deprave threats, and the proffer of latitude to countries to productively pursue their maritime equities and beneficently develop marine resources, in an ecologically sustainable and peaceful manner.(Bateman, Ho and Chan, 2009)

It can be viewed through the prism of operational concert between regional navies and coast guards, collaboratively chaperoning the maritime environment; the formalised enshrinement of norms, in promoting and preserving global commons; and actionable cooperation emphasizing the attribute of consensus in regional governance of maritime spaces. Considerations of promoting orderly maritime conduct could not be too far away either, in the construing of good order at sea, where cooperative demeanour in pursuance of avoidance of conflict, is both a concomitant necessity and obligation, to be fostered vide enhanced strategic trust and collaborative synergies, in maritime security, fisheries management, environmental protection, and expeditionary marine scientific research domains.

A dearth of good order at sea, is discernible in patterns of illicit activity at sea, or inchoate arrangements to tend to safe and secure shipping in particular, through which nine-tenths of global commerce, is in transitory traverse over exclusive economic zones, straddling thirty six per cent of ocean surface.(Michel and Passarelli, p.13, 2014). The arterial-lifeline criticality of the Indo-Pacific arena to pan-Asian and global prosperity and stability is a no-brainer; however, the stakes are high owing to the expanse being beset by a degenerative security calculus, smarting from the hybridization of non-state actor virulence and spectre of recidivist states. China's two decade long stealthy encroach, upon overwhelming stretches of South China Sea (SCS), through a combination of predatory capture of uninhabited islands vide arbitrary land reclamations; the unabashed practice of grey-zone operations through the instrumentality of fishing militias in surreptitious infractions of sovereign jurisdictions; the perversions of its vitiation of the marine ecosystem, with imperilling energy and food security consequences for littoral-states in the Indo-Pacific, has raised hackles, but also fuelled competitive militarization, amplifying the alarm of limited regional conflict.(Singh, 2018) The Indo-Pacific is also punctuated by contrasting dispositions in law-abiding sentience, seen in India's acquiescence of the UN Tribunal's adverse award in the four decade long tussle with Bangladesh over delimitation of the territorial sea, even as China swatted away the sanctity of the PCA adjudication, in its Scarborough Shoals dispute with the Philippines, perpetuating its cavernous asymmetry since, to impose in-subordinating visions of joint-development of islands, with the ASEAN's competing claimant states.

The Quad confronts this Chinese reality, and endeavours to call-out China albeit anonymously on its glowering actions, through an increasing web of synchronized military exercises, in mutual and extended partnerships with resident-littorals, promoting avowed interoperability and best practices interchange, imparting capacitation to small and middle powers within the ASEAN comity and beyond, and considering an operational devolutionary framework, incorporating out-of-region peer maritime powers. As clarion-calls groundswell, in insistence for the Quad to embrace the potential of a nautical 'Code of Conduct', or some form of a 'Maritime Charter', that desists from provocative exclusivist connotations but emphatically stresses a regional concord around higher-order principles of statecraft and praxis; New Delhi's S-A-G-A-R doctrinal-pitch and the ensuing Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) launched at the Bangkok East Asia Summit (EAS) 2019, offers one such sound sustainable framework for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), maritime domain and situation awareness (MDSA), blue economy harness, collaborative mainstreaming of islands-ecosystems in national and regional development, etc.(Cheng, 2019) Such progressive and concretely actionable agenda, would disabuse notions of a singular fetish for bulwarking of China, enabling to hem-in a wider set of sovereign-recruits, and rob Beijing of red-herring portrayal of it, as familiar echo of cold-war styled malignant ideological prejudice.(South China Morning Post, 2018)

### **The Quad meets its Strategic Calling: Capacitive Compact as Alternative Paradigm**

Much akin to ASEAN, which has been sniggered at in certain quarters, for being more of a forum for discussion rather than a platform for action, the Quad constellation too has been critiqued, since its re-initiation, for positing itself as a purportedly feckless talk-shop. Meetings were deliberately kept low-key, in terms of the profile of officialdom participation, until the Foreign Ministers first met on the margins of the annual UN General Assembly Session in September 2019. Participating nations went their separate ways in portraying proceedings, and invariably commended anodyne official speeches, couched in political correctness.

No wonder this led China to sound dismissive of the collectivisation's potential, even as Russia had its Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, avail the portals of the Raisina Dialogue, to question the conceptual constructs of the Indo-Pacific and the Quad, insinuating it as scheming anti-China schmooze; this despite New Delhi's assertion at the level of Prime Minister Modi, from the rostrum of the Shangri-la Dialogue 2018, that India stood for a Free and Open but Inclusive Indo-Pacific (FOIIP), imputing no preclude of any sovereign entity, nor sequestration action strategies, aimed at any.

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) in terms of its diplomatic forum, has often erroneously been conflated and referenced synonymously with the long predating Malabar military exercises, albeit that, in its current compositions, they mirror each other, and can be comprehended as complementing foils. 'Malabar' procreated as a bilateral US-India mechanism at naval interoperability back in 1992, and has grown over time, with incorporation of Japan in a trilateral framework, come 2015, and devolution to a maritime foursome, with Australia's induction, to the much-hyped twin-edition muscle-flexes of 2020. The latitudinal odds for extra-regional but territorially resident France, with its sovereign jurisdiction over 1.6 million residents, inhabiting loose skein islands from the Western Indian Ocean down to the South Pacific, either dovetailing into a core Quad or simply an expanded Malabar framework remain viably short, even as prospects for Germany and the UK in particular, and Netherlands and Canada to a lesser extent, to reconcile within such China perceived sharp juxtaposition framework mechanisms, is fraught.

12<sup>th</sup> March 2021, marked a proverbial inflexion-point for the Quad. After meandering through four officials' level confabulations and twin principals (Foreign Ministers) meetings, the setting of an inaugural Leaders' Summit pointed to substantive qualitative elevation of structured conversation, in what was primed to be a security dialogue in the main, until then. The fact that the participating echelons enunciated a strong vision, delineated across three verticals of vaccine development and dissemination, critical technologies seeding, and climate financing transmission, is grist-to-the-mill dispelling narrative, that the Quad is not a one-trick pony 'QSD'; instead, a construct in sprawl, on wider benefactor canvass. The embrace of India's 'Vaccine Maitri' initiative, as a seminal compact of the four Quad constituents, envisages to bring American research and development to bear, and buttressed by Japanese financing streams through JICA and JBIC, upon India and its acclaimed vaccine production wherewithal, to be leveraged through Australia's logistics legend, on last mile connectivity.(Ghosh, 2021) Such convergence is in pursuance of spawning a billion doses of vaccine for equity driven dispense to low income and profoundly stressed countries in South East Asia and in the South-Pacific, towards alleviating gripes at a time of disconcerting vaccine nationalism and hegemony, seen through Chinese treatment of citizens from clinical trials candidate countries, as putative guinea-pigs for the cull; besides, perversely linking vaccine access to eliciting concessions on collateral national interests, as was with Paraguay and its recognition of Taiwan.

Technology is a famed great leveller, whose equalising attributes are matched no less by the epochal quality of separating the men from the boys. China's burgeoning technological prowess, across a broad continuum of industrial and civilian conveniences, renders it integral to hubs of its development, and whose ingress is pyrrhic to decouple from. Notwithstanding Washington's crippling measures against allegedly recalcitrant Chinese tech-entities, and its unequivocal pitch for a 'Clean Data' Network, and despite protestations by Prime Minister Modi, stumping for trust and integrity of technology over cost based efficiencies, little categorical had emerged from the democratic comity of technological powers, in terms of reversing their ambivalence and hedging of bets on a potential rip-up severance with China, much less denying it the critical mass of chip and semi-conductors supplies and technological support. (Pant and Parpiani, 2020) The Quad has staked-out its clearest expression of interest to develop critical technologies; however, the touchstone of fervent intent, would entail, mutating political commitment into carve-up of cogently collaborative structured processes, as a credible standards and performance alternative to Chinese-tech.

Energy security and independence through diversified mix of conventional and renewables, is a tombstone goal for all countries, at a time of intense focus on decarbonisation and the imperative for tapering of climate change. Quad's leadership in conforming to temperature accretion limits, building of regional and global alliances in support of technological advent across the entire spectrum from solar to green hydrogen, and fostering of broadsheet cooperation around mitigation, adaptation, resilience, capacitation, and financial transmissions, are the Quad Summit's takeaways, on first glance. The US has returned to the Paris Accords after a period of whine, carp and brood over notions of having been inveigled. Australia, which has ridden the crest of coal extraction and exports till date, is embarking on the concurrent pursuit of exploring green-hydrogen and its commercialisation, estimated to be a twelve trillion dollar industry by 2050; an aspect of stated convergence at the Biden-Suga summit, this April. India's domestic credentials for pushing solar power capacitation and transmission, is known for years. Hence, its assumption of leadership in the wake of the Paris CoP-21, to moot and consummate the International Solar Alliance (ISA) in collaboration with France, with the intention to lateralise solar power utilization across the broad swathe of the Global South and across the Tropics, and its latest push for integration of the audacious 'One-Sun-One-World-One-Grid' (OSOWOG) enterprise, borne of the envisioning of a global interconnection of solar power grids transmission through under-ocean HDVC cables within the Glasgow CoP assemblage this November, is worthy 'normativity-performance' quotient.

### **Conclusion**

The three verticals for focussed cooperation under the Quad framework are intimately tied to sustainable development within the ambit of the SDGs for 2030, however, they also constitute strong normative influence and impulse, in that, vaccination infrastructure and logistics leading to broadened epidemiological, virology and infectious diseases cooperation; the seeding, nesting and commercialisation of military, industrial and societal technologies; and the deepening of climate related collaboration, speaks to the sustainability of societies and stakeholder ecosystems, which underpins civilized and rectitude imbued visions, for a veritably free, democratically open, and collegially inclusive Indo-Pacific realm. The Quad has traversed a fair way since it's baptism by fire at the deep end of harrowing circumstances. It has peregrinated through a politico-diplomatic exploratory exercise, which was rendered stillborn, soon after, only to be revived after an enduring hiatus, the interregnum period of which has stood testament to tectonic accretion in Chinese national power.(Madan, 2017) Now, as the Quad confronts the real prospect of Beijing deploying whole of state instrumentalities in converting the Indo-Pacific into a Chinese lake on the back of a nationalist leader steeled in the belief that China's civilizational moment has returned, it needs to lay down the marker as the lynchpin to a non-China strategic axis of a rules based Indo-Pacific order. However, the crucible of its success shall be determined by its gravitation of the middle powers such as the ASEAN states, whose own 'ASEAN Centrality' philosophy needs actionable vent.

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