**The Quad Chariot and the new great game in Indo- Pacific**

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The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue in common parlance termed as The Quad consisting of The US, Australia, Japan and India was joined by France in a Naval exercise in the Indian Ocean which ended on 7thApril. The Indian media opined that the exercise was carried out with “an eye on China”. The Times of India, a mouthpiece of the government more often than not, asserted that the exercise reflected ‘The growing strategic congruence in ensuring a secure and stable Indo-Pacific in face of China’s belligerence in the region”. According to media sources, in addition to France some other European countries such as Germany and UK have also expressed their intention to come on board the “Quad Chariot”. There are reports that some ASEAN Countries including Philippines, Malaysia and Vietnam are being vowed to join The Quad to make it Quad Plus.

Some Chinese analysts have equated Quad Plus to the “Eight Nation Alliance” which refers to troops from the US , UK, Germany, France, Russia, Japan, Italy, Australia and Austria-Hungary that invaded North China in 1900 .

Earlier on 12th March, The Quad leaders including the US President Joe Biden, Australian Prime Minister Scot Morrison, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihida Suga and the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a virtual Summit — the first summit of The Quad top leaders since the founding of the Quadrate — the brainchild of the former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

For President Joe Biden the summit was the first top level engagement since taking office as the 46thPresident of the US on 20th January, 2021. Although the agenda of the summit was couched in benign language including global collaboration to fight Covid-19 pandemic, cyber space, critical technologies, countering terrorism, quality infrastructure investment, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, yet the summit communiqué emphasised the support to rule of law, freedom of navigation over flights and territorial integrity of the regional countries; a clear pointer to China which invoked an expected severe reaction from Beijing.

The unprecedented undiplomatic spate exchanged between the US and Chinese Delegations which met in Honolulu are symptomatic of a growing distrust between the two global superpowers.

The US has an already strong Strategic military alliance with Japan and Australia, while the US and India have concluded strategic military agreements like COMCASA and BECA which lay foundations for interoperability of the two armed forces insinuating significant security implications for China — their antagonist in the Indo-Pacific theatre .

Despite Quad summit’s eyewash peace agenda, the Malabar Naval exercises as well as the last week-concluded quad plus Naval exercise unambiguously suggest that Quad alliance is heading towards a military alliance creating a military balance of power favourable to the existing super power, that is, US and posing serious threats not only to the emerging superpower, that is, China but also to the countries in the South East Asia and South West Asia. It appears that the Indo Pacific region is emerging as a “Global Hot Spot” with serious Geo-Strategic and Geo economic implications for the entire Indian Ocean Rim Countries and beyond.

Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov who visited Delhi and Islamabad recently, while commenting on the QUAD said, “We discussed in detail (the) situation of Asia-Pacific. Uncertain processes are happening; The US is pushing certain constructs in the region. We are categorically against new division lines”. His referring to “Asia-Pacific rather than Indo-Pacific that has lately been coined by the US clearly outlines Russia’s displeasure for the new anti- China alignment led by the US. India finds itself on the horns of a dilemma to strike a balance between its newly-found

strategic partnership with the US within the framework of QUAD on one hand and on the other hand, maintaining its traditional friendship with Russia.

Last week, India received the first shock of the new military tensions in the Indian ocean when The US Navy Ship John Paul entered the Indian Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The Indian Ministry of External Affairs issued a press statement saying that “Indian concerns have been conveyed to the Government of the United States through Diplomatic channels”. The ministry further elaborated, “The Government of India’s stated position on the United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Sea is that the Convention does not authorise States to carry out in the EEZ and on the Continental Shelf, military exercises or manoeuvres, in particular those involving the use of weapons or explosive, without the consent of the coastal state”. The US Navy in its statement asserted that India’s requirement of a prior consent for military exercise in its exclusive economic zone was in contravention of international law”.

The unprecedented undiplomatic spate exchanged between the US and Chinese Delegations led by their respective top diplomats, the secretary of state Antony J. Blinken and Foreign Minister Wang Yi which met in Honolulu are symptomatic of a growing distrust between the two global superpowers. The emerging new military alliances are apparently heading towards New Bipolar World Order (NBPWO), with Asia being its kingpin. Pakistan will have to play its diplomatic cards carefully, by continuing to strengthen strategic economic / political and military relationship with China, while keeping the US constructively engaged in Afghanistan, as well as in other mutually beneficial undertakings.

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