



Poll position

Context:

1. Even though more than a quarter-century has elapsed since the Constitution was amended to make urban and rural local bodies a self-contained third tier of governance, it is often agreed by experts that there is inadequate devolution of powers to them. This may somewhat explain their relative lack of autonomy.
2. However, an entirely different facet of the way these local bodies function is that the manner in which their representatives are elected is often beset by controversies.
3. Local polls are often marred by violence, and charges of arbitrary delimitation and reservation of wards. A key factor in any local body polls being conducted in a free and fair manner is the extent to which the State Election Commissioner, the authority that supervises the elections, is independent and autonomous.
4. Unfortunately, most regimes in the States appoint senior bureaucrats from among their favourites to this office. In practice, SECs frequently face charges of being partisan.
5. Routine exercises such as delimiting wards, rotating the wards reserved for women and Scheduled Castes and fixing dates for the elections become mired in controversy as a result, as the Opposition tends to believe that the exercise is being done with the ruling party's interest in mind.
6. Even though this cannot be generalised in respect of all States and all those manning the position, it is undeniable that SECs do not seem to enjoy the confidence of political parties and the public to the same extent as the Election Commission of India as far as their independence is concerned.

Independent State Election Commissioner

1. It is in this backdrop that the Supreme Court's judgment declaring that a State Election Commissioner should be someone completely independent of the State government acquires salience.
2. It has described the Goa government's action in asking its Law Secretary to hold additional charge as SEC as a "mockery of the Constitutional mandate".
3. By invoking its extraordinary power under Article 142 of the Constitution, the Court has asked all SECs who are under the direct control of the respective State governments to step down from their posts.



4. In practice, most States appoint retired bureaucrats as SECs. Whether the apex court's decision would have a bearing on those who are no more serving State governments remains to be seen.
5. However, it is clear that these governments will now have to find a way to appoint to the office only those who are truly independent and not beholden to it in any manner.

The verdict will help secure the independence of SECs in the future. More significantly, the Court has boosted the power of the election watchdog by holding that it is open to the SECs to countermand any infractions of the law made by the State government in the course of preparing for local body polls. Regimes in the States would have to wake up to the reality that they cannot always control the local body polls as in the past.

A global leader in the post-Covid era

Context: By virtue of extensive immunity due to oral vaccination, the last polio case was reported in India in January 2011. Subsequently, India was declared polio-free in 2014. The Government of India observes National Vaccination Day every year on March 16 to convey the importance of vaccination to its people. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the significance of this day becomes even more pertinent.

Medicines are global goods

1. While developed countries engaged in vaccine nationalism, it became imperative that a universal, equitable, and affordable supply of vaccines was ensured for developing countries.
2. Our initiative of making vaccines widely available for other developing countries firmly established India as the 'pharmacy of the world' and sent out the message that medical products must be dealt with as global public goods.
3. Since the beginning of the pandemic, we have been leading global efforts to mitigate the challenges by supplying medicines and generic drugs to other countries.

Role of Innovation:

1. Our educational institutions took the lead and transformed the challenges into opportunities. The IITs came up with incredible innovations like low-cost portable ventilators, affordable AI-powered COVID-19 test kits, drones for sanitisation, and cheap and effective PPE kits and masks.



2. With the help of these innovations, we were able to provide healthcare facilities to our people. We even exported this equipment to different countries, which reflects our long adage philosophy of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam.

Research and innovation

1. As we now step into a post-COVID era, it becomes more imperative to strengthen research and innovation. Through the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, we have already taken a step forward in this direction.
2. The NEP aims at improving the research and innovation landscape in India. It proposes that higher education institutions (HEIs) should focus on research and innovation by establishing start-up incubation centres, technology development centres and interdisciplinary research.
3. The HEIs should also focus on developing mechanisms and organising competitions to promote innovation among student communities. To attain the highest global standards in education, the NEP also recommends setting up Multidisciplinary Education and Research Universities, which will be on a par with IITs and IIMs.

Before the commencement of the next academic session 2021-22, the National Research Foundation (NRF) will be established under the Principal Scientific Adviser, which will transform India's research culture.

A giant leap forward for the Quad

News: The maiden Quadrilateral Security Dialogue summit of the leaders of Australia, India, Japan and the U.S. was a defining moment in Asian geopolitics. That it was a meeting at the highest political level, occasioned a productive dialogue, and concluded with a substantive joint statement is indicative of its immediate significance. The summit showed that the "Quad has come of age". If it leads to tangible action and visible cooperation, it will impact the whole region.

Five highlights

Indo-Pacific Convergence

First, past debates over diverse, even differing, visions of the Indo-Pacific are over. The joint statement struck a neat compromise: to please the U.S. and Japan, it refers to a "free and open" Indo-Pacific, but in the very next sentence it offers an elaboration – "free, open, inclusive, healthy, anchored by democratic values, and unconstrained by coercion" – that amply satisfy India and Australia.



Alignment on China strategy

Second, the summit leaders have secured an adequate alignment of their approaches towards China, even without mentioning the ‘C’ word in the document. Senior officials gave sufficient hints on this score, reinforced by phrases such as “security challenges” and “the rules-based maritime order in the East and South China Seas” in the joint statement.

Vaccine diplomacy

Third, the Quad has placed a premium on winning the battle for the hearts and minds of people in the Indo-Pacific region. The aim is to convince the nations of Southeast Asia, the Pacific Islands and the Indian Ocean region that the Quad is a benign grouping, committed to solutions for their development and well-being. This explains the special initiative to ensure equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines for every person in need in the region from the western Pacific to eastern Africa. It is both a laudable and doable objective, given the firm commitment of financial support by the U.S. and Japan, logistics and some funding from Australia, and the manufacturing and managerial capabilities of India. This new synergy is a real highlight that should result in the production of one billion vaccine doses in India by 2022.

Cooperation in Innovation

Fourth, the establishment of three working groups on vaccine partnership; climate change; and critical and emerging technologies (such as telecom and biotechnology) and their new standards, innovation and supply chains is a welcome step. Joint R&D projects may become essential. All this should get the four national establishments into serious policy coordination and action mode, creating new capacities. The careful choice of themes reflects a deep understanding of the long-term challenge posed by China and has global implications.

To be a regular exercise

Finally, the summit will not be a one-off. The leaders have agreed to meet in-person later this year, possibly at an international event within the region. Foreign ministers will gather at least once a year; other relevant officials, more often. Thus, will grow the habits of the Quad working together for a common vision and with agreed modalities for cooperation.



Other aspects

1. The summit has been watched closely by the ASEAN capitals. A few of them may express cautious welcome. Beijing seems rattled but resigned to the Quad's new momentum.
2. Among other issues discussed, the Korean Peninsula drew particular attention. The commitment to the "complete denuclearization" of North Korea as per the United Nations Security Council resolutions was reiterated – a reference to the importance of South Korea as a partner of the Quad.
3. On Myanmar, Washington heeded wise counsel from Asia. The call "to restore democracy and the priority of strengthening democratic resilience" is unexceptionable. It may help ASEAN in carrying forward its diplomatic initiative to promote reconciliation in Myanmar.