



Issue

Brief

ISSUE NO. 646
JULY 2023

Opportunities and Challenges for the Quad's Working Group on Counterterrorism

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Abstract

In March 2023, the foreign ministers of India, Japan, Australia, and the US (that form the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad) announced the establishment of a working group on countering terrorism. While the urgency of counterterrorism cooperation may have arguably faded in political debate in recent years, it remains steady in military-to-military cooperation at the bilateral and multilateral levels. In a fast-changing global order, multilateral cooperation is now contested while minilateral cooperation is promoted. The complexities of the Quad present many challenges on what cooperation on counterterrorism in this minilateral will look like, how feasible it will be, and, most importantly, how actionable it could be. This issue brief attempts to offer a realistic blueprint, through policy analysis and recommendations, on the opportunities and challenges such a mechanism will present within the already patchy and noncommittal Quad security architecture. It also explores why India, which has historically been risk averse when it comes to security debates, should attempt to lead and institutionalise the Quad counterterror architecture in partnership with the US.

Global counterterrorism policies and actions can largely be divided into the pre- and post-9/11 eras. The current counterterrorism view largely revolves around the thinking that emerged after the 9/11 attacks, which saw the launch of the ‘war on terror’,^a arguably the single most important and powerful counterterror military and diplomatic push in modern history. Scholars such as Ivo H Daalder and James M Lindsay have argued that policy imperatives developed over this period are like those of the Cold War—nasty, brutish, and long.¹ This was a period of a unipolar global order, enabling the US to steamroll its counterterrorism agenda through global multilateral systems, specifically the United Nations (UN). This utilisation of power saw India, Japan, and Australia (that, together with the US, now form the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad) largely agree to the US’s counterterror narratives, much like many other countries. However, this was easier for Japan and Australia, both allies to the US.^b For India, this was perhaps more challenging, as it tried and failed to break American patronage of Pakistan, which solidified during the Cold War, was utilised by Islamabad post 9/11, and continues to remain problematic for New Delhi.²

The rise of counterterror narratives in the post-9/11 era does not mean terrorism was not a concern in the preceding years. Since the 1960s, a crisis-riddled West Asia, with the Palestine issue at its core, gave birth to many militant organisations that took to terrorism on the pretext of Palestinian freedom. Hijacking and the targeting of passenger airliners was the popular form of terrorism (for instance, the hijacking of an Israeli flight by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine in 1968, and the mid-air bombing of Air India flight 182 by Canadian Sikh terrorist group Babbar Khalsa in 1985), with such activities being successfully employed by political, ideological, and secessionist actors as a tool to coerce both governments and populations.^{3,4} Using international law as a foundation, scholars Ayushi Tiwari and Parimal Kashyap argue that UN General Assembly resolution 40/61 from 1985, which removed grey areas on what constitutes terrorism versus a political act, was a critical juncture in multilateralism taking on terrorism in the future.⁵ Tiwari and Kashyap note that this resolution laid the foundation for future institutional development in counterterrorism, such as the Comprehensive Convention

a The ‘war on terror’ saw the US launch a war against Afghanistan with an aim to destroy the al Qaeda, and another against Iraq on (what turned out to be false) pretext of then Iraqi President Saddam Hussein developing weapons of mass destruction.

b The alliances are codified in the ‘Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan’ (1960), and the ‘Security Treaty between Australia, New Zealand and the United States of America’ (1952).

on International Terrorism, which remains under negotiation since 1996 as countries continue to debate on how to define ‘terrorism’ itself.⁶ Amid this years-long delay, terrorism has evolved, utilising newer areas of operational utility, ranging from technologies, such as social media and digital currencies, to political polarisation and climate change.

Meanwhile, today, the post-9/11 counterterror agenda is on the political backburner (although it remains militarily relevant) as other geopolitical flashpoints—particularly Russia’s war against Ukraine and the rise of China in what some now term as the emergence of a new ‘bipolar’ order—take centerstage.⁷ The dismemberment of al Qaeda over the past two decades, culminating in the killings of Osama bin Laden in 2011 and Ayman Al Zawahiri in 2022, ended, to a certain extent, a contentious era where overwhelming US power and the application of its maximum utility won Washington some friends, but also many foes.^{8,9} The botched US exit from Afghanistan in August 2021 further diluted American counterterror narratives globally. On the other side of these debates, the end of this era, often conceptualised as “forever wars”, was welcomed domestically by a tired American population and polity.¹⁰

It is crucial to understand the ‘war on terror’ era if counterterrorism is to be made a deliverable for newer diplomacy practices such as the Quad, which only has a penciled-in mandate with opaque views on security, either by design or divisions. However, the Quad has consistently held annual leadership level and foreign minister level summits, both exclusively and on sidelines of other international forums, indicating some will to act. In March 2023, a joint statement issued following the foreign ministers’ meet in New Delhi, India, announced the establishment of a Quad Working Group on Counterterrorism¹¹ (which was ratified at the Quad meet on the sidelines of the G7 summit in Hiroshima, Japan, in May 2023¹²). Prior to this, the Quad members have held two tabletop exercises on counterterrorism (the first was hosted by India’s National Investigation Agency in November 2019,¹³ and the second by Australia in Sydney in October 2022¹⁴).

This issue brief offers a blueprint on what the core aims of the Quad working group could be, while also looking at the institutional and geopolitical challenges in and around the Quad that will make a tangible counterterrorism agenda challenging.

Multilateralism and Counterterrorism

Studying the Quad's security architecture is challenging. The Quad's members publicly shy away from declaring the grouping as having military or security connotations. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and the foreign ministers of Japan and Australia have repeatedly stated that the Quad's agenda is neither security nor military, specifically when compared to other new military architectures such as AUKUS.^{15,16} However, this official line is contested by actions conducted beyond the scope of the grouping by its members, often with each other. This includes military exercises such as the Malabar naval exercise,^c and cooperative measures in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean.¹⁷ These measures are often seen as highlighting inconsistencies within the Quad on participating in debates based on hard security and, by association, hard power. The US and India seemed keener on hard security, while Australia and Japan seem to balk at such an approach, at least in posture.¹⁸ This is even though all four countries have been at the receiving end of national and transnational terrorism over the past two decades.¹⁹ Furthermore, India's participation in parallel formats, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which has both Russia and China as founding members, has raised some red flags, including by some Quad countries.²⁰ But Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said that the country's participation in the Quad and the SCO is "not contradictory or mutually exclusive".²¹

There are fundamental challenges on building a blueprint of cooperation on counterterrorism within a diplomacy structure that has non-institutionalised hard power cooperation. After 9/11, the US tasked itself in building newer, more robust, and deliverable institutions that would clamp down on Islamist terrorism, particularly groups such as the al Qaeda. This was arguably the first time, institutionally, that systems were created, and outright power, both economic and political, was used to mobilise allies, non-allies, and even enemies to adhere to the new counterterror agendas. Scholar Peter Romaniuk identified this new philosophy as the employment of "swords" and "shields",²² while others such as Paul Pillar looked upon multilateralism as "mood music" for counterterror policymaking.²³ The idea driving Romaniuk and Pillar, and others of a similar philosophical inclination, was that a 'stick' was needed to plant roots for the 'carrots', eventually produce stronger mechanisms to counter the various umbrellas under which terror activities were conducted, from terror finance to the movement of people and weapons.²⁴

c The next iteration will take place in August 2023.

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But this is a contested ‘success story’. Even as the US brandished its power in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) and United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to build a new era of diplomatic and political tools to counter terrorism (especially given that it was the only superpower to be attacked at home by a terrorist group), other states remained skeptical of allowing Washington a free hand on this matter. Other powers such as China used the opportunity to condemn international terrorism and build their own narratives of terror threats, specifically on issues relating to Uyghur Muslims and the restive province of Xinjiang. At the same time, smaller countries tried to use the UNGA to debate and conglomerate, in attempts to influence issues such as the implementation of “best practices” in countering terrorism, which often translated into binding resolutions for UN members.²⁵ For example, the bedrock of the sanction regimes and UN mechanisms against terrorism can be attributed to Resolutions 1368 and 1373, both adopted in September 2001, a few days after 9/11. However, they work in confluence with other resolutions, such as resolution 1267 from 1998, adopted for the first time when the Taliban took control of Afghanistan and offered refuge to bin Laden, al Qaeda, and its operatives.^{26,27,28}

Despite the limited yet undeniable success of some of these mechanisms as tools to counter the influence of terror-related activities, the fundamentals remain unresolved. The very definition of ‘terrorism’ and ‘terrorist’ remains in flux, as states, their political entities, and policies differ from any homogenous understanding of terrorism from a political lens. The old and overused adage of ‘one man’s terrorist is another’s freedom fighter’ is not a mere statement, but a political fact. The political convenience of labelling acts as ‘terrorism’, as scholar Alex P Schmid illustrates, is arguably the biggest stumbling block in countering terrorism. As an example, both Russia and Ukraine, in the ongoing conflict, often label each other’s acts as “terrorism” and the other country as a “terrorist state”.^{29,30} In November 2022, the European Parliament also declared Russia as a “state sponsor of terrorism”.³¹

The geopolitics of Counterterrorism and the Quad

Cooperation on counterterrorism appears to an obvious and low-hanging fruit for the relatively new minilateral format, being an easy declaration of the common values and interests of such a grouping.^{32,33}

Even though countering terrorism has a limited scope, this limitation may allow more maneuvering space for easier and faster mechanisms. Russia's war against Ukraine and the ensuing conflict on Europe's periphery has split the global security order down the middle. The unanimity that existed in the post-9/11 era, even between the US, Russia, and China, has eroded, with increasing divisions around counterterror narratives as well.

The chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan was a setback for Washington, and by association, the Quad. While the withdrawal was seen pragmatically, with India saying a forever US presence in Afghanistan was unrealistic, New Delhi also cited Afghanistan to counter criticism over its posture on Russia, questioning the reliability of long-term US commitments.³⁴ This was not a government view alone, but resonated within the public discourse as well, and not just in India.^{35,36}

As such, the challenge for the Quad working group on counterterrorism will be to decide where it can work together on the issue, and whether the ambit is limited to the Indo-Pacific or goes beyond. For instance, two of the largest terror attacks over the past decade attributed to the Islamic State took place in South Asia (the Holey Artisan Bakery attack in Bangladesh in 2016 and the Easter Sunday attacks in Sri Lanka in 2019), but the region does not have any institutionalised, truly pan-regional counterterror architectures.^{37,38} Attempts to navigate these issues at the UN can be an arduous exercise (for reasons highlighted previously in this brief), but regional and minilateral forums can be more successful avenues for such efforts. While the UN remains a good platform to shine light on the scourge of global terrorism, regional capacity building may well be the best way forward for middle powers chasing real-world actionable policies.³⁹

Building such new capacities and designs to connect regional gaps, specifically in the wider Indo-Pacific region, is where the Quad could flourish. For example, India could help the US in addressing the skepticism that Dhaka has towards Washington.⁴⁰ Building capacities in countries in South Asia and or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) regions, for example, will

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not only boost perception and help in shoring up existing institutions (from the police to deradicalisation programmes), but also equip regional partners with information and knowledge on how modern terrorism is equally about perceptions and narratives, online and offline, as it is about conventional attack capabilities of terror groups.⁴¹ Tooling regional partners should mean only offering the best practices, and not moral or ideological returns.

The Quad's working group on countering terrorism could feed into initiatives such as ASEAN's 'Our Eyes', a spinoff of sorts of the 'Five Eyes' intelligence sharing mechanism between the US, UK, New Zealand, Australia, and Canada.⁴² Adopted in 2018, 'Our Eyes' was first envisaged by Indonesia as an information sharing platform on countering terrorism kinetically and countering radicalism and violent extremism ideologically, in what scholars Joanne Lin and Laura Lee describe as a more comfortable minilateral setting for region-specific security concerns.^{43,44}

Given that South Asia does not have such a regional arrangement, largely thanks to tensions between India and Pakistan, the Quad can consider establishing a functional information and knowledge coordination center. While such an ecosystem should have ideally been platformed using the offices of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, the regional grouping has been rendered almost defunct owing to historical and political baggage between New Delhi and Islamabad.⁴⁵

Any argument against such capacity building in South Asia will ultimately be tied to India and Pakistan. As full-time members of the SCO, New Delhi and Islamabad have cooperated within this multilateral framework, including on countering terrorism. In August 2022, Pakistan was invited to attend the SCO's counterterror exercise in India under its Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS). In May 2022, a Pakistani delegation attended another RATS meet in India.⁴⁶ India had previously also contemplated sending a team to Pakistan in 2021 to attend a RATS meet, albeit downgrading it to 'observers' status. RATS claims to have prevented 20 terror attacks, killed 1,700 terrorists, and arrested 2,700 terrorism-accused between 2011 and 2015.⁴⁷ In May 2023, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari became the first Pakistani foreign minister to visit India since 2011 for the SCO foreign ministers' meet.⁴⁸

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Theoretically, India's position on Pakistan and Pakistan's position on India within the ambit of the SCO opens the doors for both to be part of regional multilaterals, and perhaps even minilaterals, through the scope of other issues and geopolitical reasonings. While the irony of Pakistan's participation in RATS alongside India is not lost on anyone, Islamabad's diplomatic presence can also be seen as another way of shining light on the problems that emit from that country. The Pakistani establishment agreeing to RATS' mandates on countering terrorism is, at least, another public pressure point to force a realisation over the country's continuing support for its state-sponsored terrorism.⁴⁹

The Quad, with India in the cockpit, can realistically look to build anti-terror incubation center that excludes Pakistan and concentrates on other countries such as Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar. Such an initiative does not need to be branded as a South Asian one, but simply a 'neighborhood' one, with a concentration on non-kinetic and non-military capacity building and cooperation. The fields of terrorism and counterterrorism have changed drastically with the proliferation of technologies adding to the challenges of ideological radicalisation. This change is clearly visible in period between the peak eras of operation and influence of the al Qaeda and the Islamic State, despite the latter emerging from the ecosystems of the former. For instance, bin Laden's famous public facing interactions during al Qaeda's peak (before 9/11) was through Western cable news networks with the few reporters who were granted access to meet him in Afghanistan's mountainous regions.⁵⁰ On the other hand, the Islamic State thrived in an era of the internet, where the concept of 'forever wars' has transformed to 'forever influence' thanks to digital technologies for terrorism and counterterrorism.

Actionable Recommendations

Given the minilateral's ambitions, the Quad working group on countering terrorism can develop and initiate the following areas:

- **Quad CT-TTX:** The counterterrorism tabletop exercise, a few of which had already taken place before the announcement of the working group, has been a humble and realistic start. Most countries in the Quad have experience dealing with various kinds of terrorism. India and the US have faced large scale terror attacks at home, Australians have been targeted in other countries such as Indonesia, while Japan has lost nationals in Afghanistan and Syria and has also had to deal with domestic cults that have taken to terrorism.^{51,52} The continued sharing of experiences between security agencies, and academics and policy researchers alike will help build strong foundations for greater cooperation in the future between various stakeholders in the four countries.
- **Consultations with regional tech companies:** The Quad working group should partner with technology companies in the smaller regional countries. In most cases, these tech companies, especially those in the space of social media, information sharing, and messaging, are understaffed and ill-informed on recognising, challenging, and deplatforming pro-terror content promoted online. For example, until recently, British radical Islamist preacher Abu Baraa's online courses were being promoted on various platforms for a price.⁵³ Countries like India have been attempting to come up with policies to counter the dissemination of such content by banning apps,⁵⁴ but it is difficult to quantify the effectiveness of such efforts.
- **Four-way database on foreign fighters:** The Quad countries could initiate a data project in collaboration with a university or think tank from each member state to develop and run a database on foreign fighters from the Indo-Pacific region known to have joined transnational terror and extremist groups. The database could be attached to the CT-TTX exercise and reviewed by members and academics alike. The academic and think tank partners could set up separate annual review platforms to discuss trends and takeaways from the said database, a project that would feed into the tabletop exercise and consultations with tech companies.

Actionable Recommendations

- **Countering terror financing:** Cooperation in countering terror finance is one of the most successful multilateral areas, such as through the Financial Action Task Force. Terror groups are now also adept with new financial technologies, from cryptocurrencies to other largely unregulated ‘neo-money’ ecosystems. These are playgrounds for jihadist and extremist groups based around racial and ethnic militancy and neofascist groups largely in the West.⁵⁵ The Quad’s working group can build a consultation bridge with the European Union’s EUROPOL, which has extensive experience across the board in such initiatives.
- **Environment, security, and terrorism:** Experts have highlighted to the UNSC that climate change will have serious effects on security in politically volatile areas. Stress on political institutions and governments applied by climate change-led challenges on natural resources such as water will increase in frequency and can be used by militant groups to recruit and radicalise. The Quad working group could offer aid and the expertise of universities and research centers in building resilience mechanisms and knowledge applications using digital technologies to establish newer response systems keeping in mind remote areas, populations, and their specific requirements.⁵⁶
- **Cooperative fund to build counter terrorism capacities:** A cooperative fund to boost counterterror capacities that is available to think tanks, universities, and high-tech startups and innovators—especially those focused on addressing challenges such as use of drones by terror groups⁵⁷ and 3D printing of weapons by extremists⁵⁸—should be made available. This will be a tangible deliverable accessible to regional partners such as ASEAN states, countries in the Indo-Pacific, the Pacific Islands, and other like-minded states. Within the fund, ‘Quad scholarships’ can be raised to help regional studies and databases to help make policies to counter violent extremism.

The hard power component of the Quad remains in a grey area, as reflected by the individual foreign policies of the member states, specifically on China, which is marketed as one—but not the only—issue on which the grouping cooperates.⁵⁹ Even as the hard power component quietly gains steam through cooperative consultations, there are ample other areas of collaboration and partnership, such as counterterrorism, that can later feed into the Quad's more concrete geostrategic aims. These include measures that help build capacity and strategic institutions, and develop trust on issues such as intelligence sharing.⁶⁰

The ongoing crisis in Ukraine and ensuing tensions between Russia and the West were expected to have an impact on intra-Quad dynamics, based largely on New Delhi's good relations with Moscow. However, these expected problems were mitigated by the fact that even Japan held on to its investments in Russia when it came to energy security despite condemning Moscow's actions, and a general acceptance of India's foreign policy and national interests by the US.

A Quad counterterrorism initiative, even a non-kinetic one, has much potential given the vast space countering terrorism now occupies beyond the traditional battlefield, and it should be pursued as a tangible deliverable around the peripheries of the grouping's hard power and collective strategic ambitions. Scholar Justin Bassi has correctly argued that the time is ripe for the Quad “to bare its teeth in regional security”, and co-building security institutions for the wider Indo-Pacific region is a wise, realistic, and timely aim.⁶¹ ORF

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