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Towards an India-US Consensus on Counterterrorism Cooperation

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ABSTRACT

This brief examines the environmental and policy-level challenges to the actualisation of US-India counterterrorism cooperation. Indeed, despite their seeming convergence on the imperative of effective counterterrorism, there has been limited cooperation between the two countries. While the US' sense of "American exceptionalism" and its hegemon status purports a utilitarian notion of the adversary, India's regional power status makes its threat perception of terrorism more defined and region-specific. This divide manifests on the policy level as an incongruent understanding of regional terror organisations' links to transnational terror networks. Moreover, continued American utilitarianism impedes any change in its outlook towards Pakistan. This paper offers recommendations to unite these divergences by exploring a new counterterrorism consensus in the Indo-Pacific matrix.

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INTRODUCTION

The India–US bilateral relationship is multidimensional. In 2018, cumulative trade (goods and services) crossed US\$142.6 billion.¹ The US is now India’s second-largest arms provider,² and the Indian armed forces conduct more joint exercises with the US military than with any other country in the world.³ Just two decades ago, the scenario was almost diametrically opposite: in 1998, the US had suspended military exercises with India, on account of its nuclear programme.⁴ In 2002, then US Ambassador to India Robert Blackwill complained that US trade flows to India were as “flat as a chapati.”⁵ By 2005, the US Congress had paved the way for India’s acquisition of the first US-built warship.⁶ Thus, the India–US partnership has charted an unprecedented trajectory despite the absence of either a free trade agreement or a formal security alliance treaty. Former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee’s characterisation of India and the US as “natural allies”⁷ is often reiterated by a succession of officials to assert a convergence of *values* between the two old democracies—even before there was a unity in their *interests*.

Analysts often tend to adopt a *realpolitik* approach by overstating the relevance of China’s rise to the US’ policy shift towards India, which began at the turn of this century, after a period of estrangement due to the latter’s nuclear programme. Although such an assertion is valid, the two countries’ common experience with terrorism has been equally responsible for the US’ policy shift.

After the attacks on US soil on 11 September 2001, the George W. Bush administration recognised the potential of engagement with India.⁸ This realisation was strengthened after the terror attacks on the Indian Parliament, just two months after 9/11. Under the US-led “War on Terror” effort that followed, the Bush administration’s military

adventurism in Iraq and Afghanistan was coupled with an outreach to the world's democracies, which Bush had previously deemed to be his predecessor's gravest foreign policy failure.⁹ Thus, in addition to viewing India as a long-term "counterweight" to China's rise,¹⁰ the Bush administration began its strategic outreach, with actions such as reinstating military exercises with India to bring together like-minded democratic partners against transnational terrorism.

REGIONAL VS. GLOBAL OUTLOOK DIVIDE

Counterterrorism cooperation between India and the US began at the turn of the century. However, even after two decades, the pace of policy outcomes in this area has been modest at best (See Table 1).

Therefore, despite having identified areas of convergence, little has been done in terms of concrete policy outcomes. This paradox—of seemingly evident convergences not translating into commensurate policy outcomes—has stemmed largely from the conflicting environmental factors that inform each nation's perception of its adversary.

Scholars examining the intersection of constructivism and foreign policy have suggested that the US has long considered itself as a "norm revisionist,"¹¹ due to its hegemonic status as the globally preeminent economic and military power. Thus, the US often reshapes international normative frameworks to better align them with its own interests. For example, conventional wisdom on international law finds the 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan to be an act of "self-defence;" however, the war in Iraq cannot be similarly classified.¹² To justify this policy offensive, the Bush administration declared Iraq as an "imminent threat"¹³ based on suggested linkages between Saddam Hussein, the al-Qaeda, and so-called "weapons of mass destruction."¹⁴

Table 1: Key Developments in the Realm of India–US Counterterrorism Cooperation

Sr. No.	Year	Joint Statement/ Working Group/ Joint Exercise/ Bilateral Dialogue	Significance
1	2000	India–US Statement on Joint Working Group on Counterterrorism	Inter-agency teams from the US and India “agreed on a range of measures to enhance cooperation between the two countries to combat international terrorism. The two sides would share experience, exchange information, and coordinate approaches and action.”
2	2002	India–US Counterterrorism Joint Working Group	Launched a bilateral Cyber-Security Forum, with “a wide-ranging program of action to address challenges of cyberterrorism and information security.”
3	2006	Indian Army and US Marines, Joint Exercise, EX Shatrुjeet	The Indian Army and the US Marine Corps conducted “training in semi-urban terrain with a view to enhance interoperability at functional level and share experience of CT operations along with OOTW (Operations Other Than War) training and operations of an Infantry/Marine company as part of an Infantry Marine Battalion.”
4	2010	India–US Strategic Dialogue, Joint Statement	The statement “reiterated the continued U.S. commitment to provide full cooperation and support in ongoing counterterrorism investigations, including through continued exchanges of information between designated agencies and by bringing the perpetrators of the 2008 Mumbai terrorism attack to justice.”

5	2011	India-US Homeland Security Dialogue	The two sides “decided to strengthen agency-to-agency engagement, including in the areas of intelligence exchange, information sharing, forensics and investigation, access and sharing of data relating to terrorism, security of infrastructure, transportation and trade, conducting joint needs assessments, combating counterfeit currency, countering illicit financing and transnational crime. They agreed that the two sides shall designate points of contact and establish protocols for engagement.”
6	2011	India-US Counterterrorism Cooperation Initiative	Instituted cooperation towards “strengthening capabilities to effectively combat terrorism; promotion of exchanges regarding modernization of techniques; sharing of best practices on issues of mutual interest; development of investigative skills; promotion of cooperation between forensic science laboratories; establishment of procedures to provide mutual investigative assistance; enhancing capabilities to act against money laundering, counterfeit currency and financing of terrorism; exchanging best practices on mass transit and rail security; increasing exchanges between Coast Guards and Navy on maritime security; exchanging experience and expertise on port and border security; enhancing liaison and training between specialist Counter Terrorism Units including National Security Guard with their US counterparts.”
7	2015	India-US Joint Declaration on Combatting Terrorism	Recognised the threat posed by “entities such as Al-Qa’ida and its affiliates, Lashkar-e-Tayibba, Jaish-e-Mohammad, D Company, and the Haqqani Network, and other regional groups that seek to undermine stability in South Asia.”

8	2016	India-US Cooperation between Ministry of Home Affairs and the US' Terrorist Screening Center	India and the US sign the agreement to exchange terrorism-screening information between the US' Federal Bureau of Investigation and India's Intelligence Bureau.
9	2018	India-US Homeland Security Presidential Directive-6	India formally entered into the US Homeland Security Presidential Directive-6 (HSPD-6), to enable it to access unclassified biographic information of known and suspected terrorists in real time.
10	2018	Joint Statement on the Inaugural India-US 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue	The two sides "committed to enhance their ongoing cooperation in multilateral fora such as the UN and FATF."
11	2019	Exercise Yudh Abhyas	Exercise between the armies of India and the US focused on "specialised drills and procedures involved in counter insurgency & counter terrorist operations in an urban environment."
12	2019	Counterterrorism Tabletop Exercise (CT-TTX) for QUAD countries	Assessed and validated "CT response mechanisms in the light of emerging terrorist threats as well as to provide opportunities to share best practices and to explore areas for enhanced cooperation amongst participating countries."
13	2019	Joint Statement on the Second India-US 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue	The two sides took note of "the judicial cooperation on terrorism cases between the National Judicial Academy in Bhopal, India and the U.S. Federal Judicial Center" and committed to "facilitate further cooperation between them in new areas and through joint judicial workshops for third-country partners."

American constructivism, as embodied in its desire to reshape legal normative frameworks at the macro level, stems from the continued influence of American exceptionalism in contemporary US foreign policy. Its sense of itself as the “chosen nation” and the leader of the liberal world order informs its tendency to view domestic terrorism struggles as having global ramifications.¹⁵ Further, such a worldview fosters a fluid conception of the adversary, allowing the US some leeway for tactical and strategic aims.

While the desire for fluidity may seem like a by-product of the 9/11 attacks, its relevance predates the event. Two examples from the pre- and post-9/11 timeline illustrate this longstanding relevance.

1. During the years of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which began in 1979, the US funded and armed rebel groups in Afghanistan, known as the Mujahideen, to combat the threat posed by communism in South Asia.¹⁶ However, under the Bush administration’s global war on terror (GWOT), the same armed insurgency and its offshoots became crucial impediments to the US interests of removing the Taliban from power.¹⁷ Thus, the US’ shift in priorities in South Asia led to the Mujahideen’s relegation from a crucial operational ally to illegitimate abettors of the al-Qaeda.
2. In 2011, the US carried out the extra-judicial killing of Anwar al-Awlaki in Yemen, using a drone strike. This was the first case of a US citizen being executed by the state without due process.¹⁸ Anwar al-Awlaki was an Imam at the Dar al Hijrah in Virginia, and following 9/11, the Bush administration held him up “as a new generation of Muslim leader capable of merging the East and the West.”¹⁹ However, al-Awlaki’s disenchantment with the West grew over the years, and in 2010, he recorded and released the “Call for

Jihad,” a brief video where he outlined why it is the moral duty of every Muslim to kill all Americans.²⁰ Thus, Anwar al-Awlaki went from being the personification of moderate Islam during the Bush administration to embodying the very radicalism the US hoped he would quell. With the Obama administration’s order for his killing, the US acknowledged al-Awlaki’s turn towards radicalisation. By extension, it demonstrated American fluidity in its understanding of terrorism (from foreign threats to national security to internal threats by its own citizens).²¹ This was followed by the Donald Trump administration, which ordered a strike on al-Awlaki’s youngest child in 2017.²²

The two examples discussed above show the US’ fluidity in two ways. In the Iraq case, the US reshaped legal-normative frameworks at the macro level to rationalise its policies in the region. In the case of Anwar al-Awlaki, the US took action against individual agents of terror (and their children), who were also US citizens, in consideration of its utilitarian interests and the threat to national security.

India’s situational context with regard to counterterrorism is slightly different than the US’. While the US is a global hegemon, India is a regional power. Being the world’s largest democracy that has been growing in international influence, India, unlike the US, is not in a position to frame the normative construct of the adversary or the means to tackle them. Thus, it subscribes to a crystallised notion of terrorists and terrorism. Threat perception in the Indian security calculus has remained largely consistent: embodied by the idea of “Islamist” terrorism rooted in the ongoing conflict in and over Kashmir and cases attributed to Pakistani state-sponsored infiltration of terrorists.²³

This narrow threat perception was reflected in the structuring of

the 2002 Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA). The POTA was subject to intense debate regarding its differential treatment of minorities in India.²⁴ Article Three of the Act defined terrorism as any act done “with intent to threaten the unity, integrity, security or sovereignty of India or to strike terror in the people or any section of the people.”²⁵ The ambiguity of this definition was further compounded by Section 57 of the Act, which gave immunity to government institutions as long as the activities to combat terror are done “in good faith.”²⁶ However, what constitutes “good faith” had not been clearly articulated in the law, thereby increasing the possibility of its misuse in the hands of law enforcement agents, who can purport a regional and predominantly Muslim identity of terrorists. Thus, the POTA reinforced the idea that the Indian establishment does not seek the same fluidity in conceptualising terrorism that the US does.

A central threat to India’s security apparatus is located in the Kashmir Valley. Tied to disputes about autonomy and alleged unfulfilled promises by the Indian state, the longstanding conflict has had severe implications for Indian national security in recent decades.²⁷ Pakistan has effectively used “subversive statecraft”²⁸ to exacerbate the conflict, as witnessed in its weaponisation of homegrown militancy. Moreover, an increasingly disenchanted civilian population has been instrumental in fuelling the insurgency and creating a region-specific threat perception. This is in stark contrast to the more global nature of the US’ threat perception. For the Indian state, terror threats have largely centred around regional groups such as the Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT), the Indian Mujahideen, and the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), while the US counterterrorism apparatus—much in line with its GWOT agenda—has focused more on transnational groups such as the Haqqani Network (HQN), al-Qaeda and, more recently, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

The divergent threat perceptions of the two countries clashed in the aftermath of the 26 November 2008 terror attacks (26/11) in Mumbai. In the run-up to the attacks, the Indian intelligence community suspected that the US had more information about the nature and scale of the attacks than they had revealed to India.²⁹ The American ambivalence to India's threat perception was validated by how the US chose to deal with David Coleman Headley (Daood Gilani), an American citizen of Pakistani origin, who had links to the DEA and was considered complicit in the 26/11 attacks.³⁰ The US allowed Headley to enter a secret plea bargain and restricted access to his testimony. He was subsequently captured in 2009, after being found guilty of contacting Ilyas Kashmiri (the operational head of the al-Qaeda), for plotting attacks in Western Europe.³¹ The delayed conviction of Headley, for activities other than the 26/11 attacks, devolved into a diplomatic crisis, wherein the Indian security establishment's conception of terrorism confronted the utilitarian underpinnings of the US' conception. Headley's alleged ties to the ISI and his former link with the DEA fuelled the US' ambivalence in convicting Headley for the Mumbai attacks.³² Moreover, this case was evidence that the hegemon's utilitarian interest overrides its commitment to cooperating with India on counterterrorism.

The US and India have now seen the rise of strongman leaders that have risen to popularity with a common understanding of imminent threat.³³ The populist usage of the term "Islamic terrorism" instead of "Islamist terrorism" has become a point of convergence in rhetoric for the two countries, evident most recently at the "Howdy Modi!" event in Texas.³⁴ Does this mean that the fluidity of the American conception of terrorism has become a thing of the past? Have these leaders ironed out longstanding divergences? How does India's growing importance in the US' Indo-Pacific calculus affect convergences on terrorism?

The Path to Convergent Policy Outcomes

In the context of combatting terrorism, India's concerns largely pertain to Pakistan-based organisations such as the LeT, JeM and HM. The US' focus, on the other hand, has been on terror organisations relevant to the GWOT effort in Afghanistan and Iraq, such as the al-Qaeda, HQN and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, formerly the al-Qaeda in Iraq), or other transnational terror networks that are a threat to the US interest in multiple hotspots, such as the al-Shabaab, Jemaah Islamiya (JI) and Boko Haram.

In the last few years, Modi and Trump have overseen some developments in counterterrorism cooperation between India and the US. For instance, following Modi's mid-2017 visit to the US, the US State Department designated Hizbul Mujahideen (HM) as a "foreign terrorist organisation" (FTO).³⁵ Since the designation of LeT and JeM as FTOs back in 2001,³⁶ this was the first designation of an entity that largely defines itself in the regional context of South Asia and, more specifically, in opposition to India. It came as a welcome development in the process of bridging the regional-global outlook divide.

India has made efforts to facilitate a congruent understanding of the interconnectedness between this "mosaic" of terror groups, i.e. they are "joined at the hip" through their common goals.³⁷ Some prominent cases that suggest coordination, or at least congruence, of interests include the following:

1. The attacks in 2008 on the Indian Embassy in Kabul by the HQN.³⁸
2. The tacit cooperation between JeM and al-Qaeda in the attack on

the Indian Parliament in 2001, with the aim of “diverting Pakistan’s army to the east, to the border with India for the next year”³⁹ rather than to its western border with Afghanistan in support of US efforts against al-Qaeda; and

3. Taliban’s role in LeT’s hijacking of Air India flight IC 814 in late-1999, which ended with India releasing JeM founder Masood Azhar in exchange for hostages.⁴⁰

A recent example of India–US synchronisation was Washington’s support in overseeing the addition of JeM leader Masood Azhar to the United Nations’ (UN) 1267 ISIL and al-Qaeda Sanctions List.⁴¹ Following the February 2019 JeM-led attacks in Kashmir, which killed over 40 Indian security personnel, the US expended considerable political capital on ensuring its designation as FTO,⁴² especially by coaxing China to lift its “hold” on the matter at the UN Security Council.⁴³ In June 2018, India and the US seemingly came together to oversee Pakistan’s grey listing at the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), a Paris-based intergovernmental body to “combat money laundering, terrorist financing and other related threats to the integrity of the international financial system.”⁴⁴ In October 2019, the FATF retained Pakistan in the grey list for “poor performance on the 27-point action plan” against terror outfits, which also included India-focused JeM and LeT.⁴⁵

However, this increasing India–US congruence regarding terror outfits and agents has not translated into congruence on policy, especially vis-à-vis Pakistan. The Trump administration’s intent to increase pressure on Pakistan by suspending military aid and coalition support funds (cumulatively worth over US\$2 billion since January 2018) stems from political considerations around an impending US exit

from Afghanistan. On more than one occasion, US officials have deemed suspension of aid to be “until the Pakistani government takes decisive action” against US-focused groups such as the Afghan Taliban and the HQN.⁴⁶ Moreover, since US–Taliban negotiations surpassed Trump’s multiple deadlines for US military withdrawal from Afghanistan, the US is now considering the restoration of military ties with Pakistan.

In late 2019, the US approved a US\$125-million “support program for Pakistan’s fleet of F-16 warplanes,”⁴⁷ and announced its “intent to allow Pakistan to rejoin” the International Military Education and Training (IMET) for military cooperation “following a two-year suspension.”⁴⁸ Ahead of the February 2020 FATF review of Pakistan’s progress, to decide whether it should be taken off the grey list or further moved to the blacklist, Alice Wells (US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia) said, “It is heartening to see that Pakistan’s government has made significant progress on these matters and that too in a short time.”⁴⁹ The US’ hegemonic trait of preserving utilitarian space for its strategic interests—in this case, military ties with Pakistan—impedes the seeming India–US policy congruence. As the US enters the 2020 election cycle, its policies are expected to be informed by the political goal of withdrawing US forces from Afghanistan.

In late February 2020, the US signed a peace agreement with the Taliban, pledging to draw down its troops from about 13,000 to 8,600, i.e. the pre-Trump numbers, within 135 days of signing the agreement, and thereafter remove all troops within 14 months. Departing from its longstanding policy of strengthening the democratically elected dispensation in Afghanistan, the US did not condition its withdrawal on “political stability in Afghanistan or any specific outcome from the all-Afghan peace talks.”⁵⁰ Instead, Washington merely pegged its withdrawal to the Taliban, preventing “any group or individual,

including al-Qaida, from using the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies.”⁵¹ The agreement was solely aimed at addressing the Trump administration’s political motivation to withdraw US troops in an election year. Moreover, such an agreement undercut the interests of US partner nations such as India—one of the largest contributors of civilian aid to Afghanistan—as it made no mention of Taliban’s commitments to rein in Pakistan-affiliated groups that stoke regional tensions.

Moreover, when the Trump administration designated HM as an FTO in 2017, as per the Bush-era Executive Order 13224, it concurrently placed the outfit on the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctions list of the US Department of the Treasury.⁵² The sanctions list states that “all property and interests in property of designated individuals or entities that are in the United States or that come within the United States, or that come within the possession or control of U.S. persons are blocked.”⁵³ However, the enforcement purview of this sanction is limited to mere property or bank accounts being operated in the US by Pakistan-based terror organisations, which makes the move largely symbolic. Ahead of US President Barack Obama’s visit to India in 2010, the US Department of Treasury had similarly designated Azam Cheema,⁵⁴ a key operational commander of the 2008 Mumbai attacks. The move was intended to soothe tempers, as the visit came amidst an ongoing diplomatic fallout over American citizen David Headley’s involvement in the 2008 Mumbai attacks.⁵⁵ Thus, US support often translates to symbolic ones that fail to address Indian concerns in a tangible manner.

The Trump administration has also infused a certain degree of transactionalism as a normative feature in India–US bilateral dynamic. While the policy goal for seeking “fair and reciprocal” bilateral trade

deals may be the prime motivation behind heightened transactionalism, the Trump administration has also sought Indian policy congruence towards nations that are deemed adversarial to the US. For instance, in exchange for the US effort to designate Azhar under the UN's 1267 sanctions list, the Trump administration reportedly conveyed its wish to have India cease its oil imports from Iran.⁵⁶ In a bid to cut off one of Iran's major sources of revenue, the US secured India's compliance—which was one of Iran's largest importers of oil until early 2019—to the American “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran.

Such transactionalism has also hindered the progress on instituting frameworks for India-US counterterrorism cooperation. While there have been no major impediments to the workings of established consultative platforms (such as the India-US Counterterrorism Joint Working Group and the India-US Homeland Security Dialogue), the two nations have failed to insulate counterterrorism cooperation from divergences in other issues. For instance, the expected upgrade to forging coordination channels—as under the 2011 India-US Counterterrorism Cooperation Initiative and the 2016 agreement on data exchanges between India's Multi Agency Centre (MAC) and the FBI's Terrorist Screening Centre (TSC)—was momentarily marred by bilateral divergences on data localisation. The 2018 signing of the Homeland Security Presidential Directive (HSPD-6) was stalled, as the two sides linked it to the bilateral bone of contention over India's call for data localisation by US-based digital services.⁵⁷

Finally, the US' policymaking hinders not only the actualisation of India-US counterterrorism cooperation but also India's complete integration into the American security calculus in the region. Under the Indo-Pacific construct, the US is seeking India's emergence as a regional goods provider in the Indian Ocean Region. However, this goal

stands compromised due to India's domestic security calculus, both in terms of cross-border terrorism and Pakistan-based organisations' support of radicalised insurgents in Kashmir. In addition to the previously discussed environmental issues, these structural, policy-level divergences hinder the India–US counterterrorism cooperation. It is now imperative for the US and India to focus on building institutional linkages to address and resolve their disagreements.

Recommendations for Building Institutional Links

The lack of a policy congruence on Pakistan plays a central role in impeding India–US counterterrorism cooperation. The issue has temporarily been ironed out by blatant transactionalism, as in case of designating Azhar, as well as India's capitalisation of the US' increased pressure on Pakistan (as in case of the FATF listing). Going forward, however, this approach, which is hinged on variables falling in place or at particular points of friction in US–Pakistan ties, counterintuitively only elevates the significance of Pakistan in India–US ties.

The India–US counterterrorism agenda must seek greater institutionalisation, instead of relying on Pakistan's rising and falling relevance in American considerations regarding terror networks. The two nations can take a page from their defence ties, which has witnessed a considerable degree of institutionalisation in recent years, spurred by the US' de-hyphenation policy with India and Pakistan.

Exploring counterterrorism cooperation in the Indo-Pacific matrix

In terms of the US' strategic thinking, both the Clinton and Bush administrations pursued the de-hyphenation of India–Pakistan.⁵⁸ For instance, in addition to the exclusion of agricultural exports from

sanctions' purview for both, in the case of India, the US also voted for a World Bank loan meant for child education and healthcare.⁵⁹ On the other hand, the freeze on Pakistan's arms sales and military aid were left in place until the imperatives of the post-9/11 War on Terror warranted a shift. Thus, while the US gradually off-ramped sanctions on India and Pakistan for their respective nuclear programmes, the considerations for the two were independent of one another. Further, the Bush administration accorded only India with a tacit recognition of its nuclear programme, with the Indo-US Civil Nuclear Deal.

Over the years, this de-hyphenation of India-Pakistan in US policy towards South Asia ensured its pursuit of an independent policy on India. The Obama administration further sought the hyphenation of Pakistan and Afghanistan. This allowed the US to cultivate India as a strategic partner towards the eastward security calculus based in the US' "Pivot to Asia" policy, while keeping Pakistan engaged westward with the US' security considerations in Afghanistan. The subsequent pursuit of strategic ties, mainly in terms of defence trade and force interoperability, between India and US occurred in an alternate, eastward security matrix, i.e. the geopolitical construct of the Indo-Pacific.

To seek advances on institutionalising India-US counterterrorism cooperation, the viable alternative to coaxing policy congruence on Pakistan may be to build institutional, department-level links to the US homeland security establishment. This may also aid India's efforts to make the US become more amenable to changing its approach to Pakistan and, by extension, dampen the divide between India's regional and the US' global outlook to terror networks. Thus, greater inroads into the US' apolitical, security apparatus will be an effective way to seek alterations on political considerations that generally inform the

US' approach to Pakistan, in particular, and counterterrorism efforts in South Asia, in general.

India has already made some efforts in exploring a new counterterrorism consensus in the matrix of the Indo-Pacific. For instance, the annual exercise between Indian and American armies recently assumed a counterterrorism dimension. The Yudh Abhyas 2019 focused “on specialised drills and procedures involved in counter insurgency & counter terrorist operations in an urban environment.”⁶⁰ Last year, India’s National Investigation Agency (NIA) convened the first Counter Terrorism Tabletop Exercise (CT-TTX) for Quad member countries. Going beyond that grouping’s *raison-d’être* of ensuring a “free and open Indo-Pacific,”⁶¹ the CT-TTX helped “assess and validate CT response mechanisms in the light of emerging terrorist threats as well as to provide opportunities to share best practices and to explore areas for enhanced cooperation amongst participating countries.”⁶²

Going forward, India must continue to explore such counterterrorism consensus against the backdrop of India-US convergences in the Indo-Pacific.

Cultivating a specialised counterterrorism intel framework

To promote institutional linkages between the two nations, India can model its counterterrorism apparatus on the American one, by decentralising the process of intelligence-gathering and dissemination. Currently, India’s office of the National Security Adviser (NSA) is responsible for monitoring the 14 intelligence agencies, overseeing the integration of intelligence reports from state-level MACs, and reporting their findings to the prime minister. Further, the NSA advises the PM on pertinent matters of internal security, such as the Kashmir conflict, and works as the special interlocutor to China.⁶³

Such a wide-ranging scope of responsibilities makes it challenging for the NSA's office to adequately discharge its duty.

In this context, the Indian establishment can take a leaf from the American counterterrorism apparatus, which has a provision for a Director of National Intelligence (DNI). Working under the purview of the American NSA, the DNI is responsible for overseeing the functioning of the National Intelligence Program and advise the US president's executive office of Homeland Security and the NSA when required.⁶⁴ An intelligence chief modelled on the DNI provision may help reduce the burden on the Indian NSA's office and make it more efficient in reporting intelligence findings.

In the past, India has tried to model its counterterrorism apparatus on the American system. In the aftermath of the 26/11 attacks in Mumbai, there was an attempt to institute an overarching counterterrorism agency that would integrate predictive intelligence and counter-intelligence.⁶⁵ Formally referred to as the National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC), this body was modelled after the American variant by the same name and was supposed to subsume the MAC, which was initially a "fusion centre"⁶⁶ of intelligence within the IB.⁶⁷ However, it could not be institutionalised in India due to strong domestic opposition. The proposal, tabled by the UPA government, was opposed due to its perceived infringement on federalism and the freedom of state security agencies.


Appointing a chief intelligence officer under its purview will benefit the NSA by reducing its burden and increasing its operational efficiency. Moreover, this officer could also work in close proximity with the American DNI to enhance information-sharing and forge a common understanding on the macro-perspective informing India-US counterterrorism cooperation.

CONCLUSION

The India–US counterterrorism cooperation has seen a symbolic convergence, anchored on the shared identities of being vibrant democracies and victims of terrorism. However, there have been limited tangible advances on the policy front. A core reason for this stems from the strong utilitarian underpinnings of American threat perception, which inform its policy decisions pertaining to counterterrorism. Given the regional specificity of India’s threat perception, inevitable differences are bound to exist between the two nations. Thus, it is imperative for India to acknowledge this facet of the hegemon and work towards an alignment of India’s interest in combating regional terror with America’s utilitarian interests of upholding its primacy and a considerable degree of strategic manoeuvre.

Defence cooperation and force interoperability between the two countries in the matrix of the Indo-Pacific has been successful in alleviating the regional–global outlook divide. Similarly, pursuing institutional linkages in the context of a renewed counterterrorism consensus under the Indo-Pacific matrix can help dampen the environment and policy-level challenges currently riddling India–US counterterrorism cooperation. This will also align with the announced shift in focus of the US national security apparatus to the Indo-Pacific.

The Trump administration’s National Defence Strategy, 2018—the first in over a decade—announced “inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism,” as “the primary concern in U.S. national security.”⁶⁸ Thus, the US’ global outlook is increasingly set to be informed by “great power competition,” as was the case with the National Security Strategy, 2017, vis-à-vis Russia and China.⁶⁹

Exploring counterterrorism cooperation in the Indo-Pacific will ensure the US' continued focus on counterterrorism and recognise its global interests of a "great power competition," predominantly playing out in the Indo-Pacific region. For India, it can ensure American support against the regional terror networks. For instance, India's repeated articulation of concerns regarding LeT and JeM infiltration⁷⁰ into Myanmar's Rakhine province has so far failed to receive US support,⁷¹ as the focus has largely been on either the humanitarian crisis of the Rohingya Muslims or China's rising influence and strategic investments in Myanmar. For greater institutionalisation of India-US counterterrorism cooperation, leveraging the US' considerations on "great power competition" in the Indo-Pacific matrix must be prioritised. 

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